







Copyright

  
**Librarian**

**Uttarpara Joykrishna Public Library  
Govt. of West Bengal**





# THE GREAT ATTACK

## Meerut Conspiracy Case

*by*

Sohan Singh Josh



PEOPLE'S PUBLISHING HOUSE  
NEW DELHI

*March 1979 (P 150)*

Printed by Jiten Sen at the New Age Printing Press, Rani Jhansi Road,  
New Delhi-110055, and published by him for People's Publishing House  
(P) Ltd., Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi-110055.

*Price.* Rs. 20.00 (Library)

*Price:* Rs. 8.00 (Popular)

## PREFACE

I congratulate the party for having decided to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Meerut Conspiracy Case which falls on 20 March this year. It will provide an opportunity to our comrades to know how boldly their predecessors fought.

This booklet is an incomplete and inadequate story of the Meerut Conspiracy Case trial which dragged on for about four years. It deals with the history of the work done by the communists in India in the twenties up to 20 March 1929 and tells us about the bold stand that they took in the trial. The material on the trial is worth a serious study. Some young research scholars should take it up. All the material is today available in the National Archives of India, the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

This booklet attempts to tell the readers how daringly the communist prisoners and founders of the Communist Party of India and the communist movement fought against their enemies and how they foiled the attempt of British imperialism to smother communist thought and its upholders. Up to now this historic struggle has been ignored and neglected, depriving our revolutionary democratic youth of one of our most valued heritage.

The Meerut trial was unique in the history of development of the revolutionary political movement in India, as unique as the Lahore Conspiracy Case of the great patriot Bhagat Singh and his comrades. In both the cases, the "conspirators" fought against British imperialism tooth and nail, unmindful of the consequences. Both trial-accused took the bull by the horn and tore to shreds the so-called "even-handed justice" of the British courts and exposed them as class courts and their class justice. Comrades involved in both the cases made great sacrifices and challengingly stood their ground. It was a very big thing that most of the Lahore case comrades learnt Marxism-Leninism inside jail and later joined the ~~Communist Party~~ of

India. One of them, Comrade Ajoy Ghosh, rose to occupy the position of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India for a decade. Before his martyrdom, Bhagat Singh himself became a communist and wrote from jail:

"The nation can wage a successful struggle only on the strength of organised workers, kisans and the common people... It is my firm belief that we will not profit by bombs and pistols. This is clear from the history of the HSRA (Hindustan Socialist Republican Army). Our main objective should be to organise workers and kisans" (*New Age*, 20 March 1955).

Both the conspiracy cases have important lessons for the revolutionary democratic youth of today. Perhaps there would have been no naxalites if our youth had imbibed the lessons of these two conspiracy case trials. The CPI, in my opinion, should do following three things immediately: (1) It should fix up a few young scholars to study and write out the history of these two conspiracy cases; (2) It should prepare notes for the education of our party comrades on these cases; and (3) It should edit and publish the individual statements of the Meerut under-trials in booklet form.

It is necessary to kindle that illuminating fire of idealism and sacrifice which inspired and influenced the comrades in the above two conspiracy cases, especially those days when bourgeois corruption and other vices are likely to erode the moral principles of our class conscious comrades.

I recommend to the youth of India to get and read the statements made by the communist accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case trial. They will be greatly benefited by them. The statements will help them to understand communist ideology and practice better.

I hope that, though not up to the mark, the booklet will prove useful to our youth and other comrades and enrich their understanding of Marxism-Leninism.

New Delhi,  
15 January 1979

SOHAN SINGH JOSHI

## CONTENTS

Preface	v
Historical Background	1
Early Efforts	2
Peshawar Conspiracy	5
The Non-cooperation Movement	8
Rise of the New Force	13
Kanpur Conspiracy Case	17
Communist Party of India Formed	22
Workers' & Peasants' Parties	26
Simon Commission	32
Shapurji Saklatvala's Visit	33
Saklatvala-Gandhi Correspondence	37
Jawaharlal Nehru & Brussels	38
Jawaharlal Nehru & Madras Congress	40
Simon Commission Boycott	44
Anti-Working Class Bills	48
Workers' & Peasants' Party Conference in Calcutta	51
43rd Session of the National Congress	54
Youth and National Freedom	56
All India Trade Union Congress Eighth Session in Kanpur	59
The Working Class Struggles	62
BNR Workers' Strike	66
Lillooah Workshop Strike	70
Tata Iron and Steel Works	72
Bauria Jute Mills	73
Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case	75



## 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The biggest event that took place during the first world war was the October (7th November) Revolution under the leadership of Comrade V. I. Lenin. It shook the world capitalist system from top to bottom. Its worldwide revolutionary significance becomes more and more clear with the passage of time. It heralded the coming to power of the new class—the working class. It brought a message of hope and inspiration to the colonially enslaved people of the globe—the message of national liberation.

From that time onward the general crisis of capitalism began and the process of ascendancy of the working class on the one hand and the decline of imperialism on the other started with the result that capitalism-imperialism is today in shambles, embroiled in one crisis after another, while the Soviet Russian revolution is forging ahead with seven league boots, winning victory after victory. Today, barring a few countries, almost the whole world has freed itself from the chains of colonial slavery and has become free. Communist parties are in power in one country or another in all the continents. More than one-third of the world is today being ruled by the communists.

The October Revolution shattered the theory of the perpetuity or everlasting nature of the capitalist system. Socialism-communism is the future of the world, not capitalism-imperialism. This is seen and recognised by all the honest and impartial historians and political thinkers. Influence and impact of the Russian revolution is deepening and widening with the passage of time.

Enslaved people of the colonial world saw with their own eyes that the October Revolution set free all the tsar's colonies, calling upon them to overthrow their landlords and other blood-suckers and decide their own future. This was quite a new thing in world history which sent a terrible shiver through the



spine of world imperialism. They saw the writing on the wall and understood its meaning.

From that time onwards world imperialism became the deadliest enemy of Soviet Russia. It launched a campaign of slander and smear against the October Revolution and Soviet Russia, using all the foul, criminal and wicked means at its command in order to save its colonial empires, monopolies and its allies—moribund landlords and kings. All the propaganda media were in its possession. It left no stone unturned to make sparkling white the ugly black.

British imperialism had the biggest empire in the world in its possession. Colonial India—the biggest one—was specially very dear to the British imperialists because it had tremendous wealth which could be exploited. India provided them with cheap labour, not different from bonded labour, abundant raw materials and minerals for exploitation—foodgrains, cotton, tea, sugar and jute, etc., for the consumption of the British people in Britain at throw-away prices. The British rulers did not care a damn for the misery, starvation and hunger deaths of the Indian people in their millions. And last but not the least, India had a number of army recruitment centres for expansion and strengthening of the British empire.

Because of this, the British imperialists wanted to perpetually keep this 'jewel' of all colonies under their iron-clad heel for their blood-thirsty exploitation and thrive on its loot and wealth. But the Indian people were thinking otherwise. They were determined to throw away the colonial yoke and liberate themselves from British colonial slavery.

## 2. Early Efforts

Marxist ideology had begun to penetrate in India through different channels. The British government was controlling the news media completely. The British-controlled press gave all news about the Soviet revolution in 1918 in a distorted form

and with an anti-Soviet bias and hostility. The Soviet communists were described as 'murderers' and 'assassins' and what not! But the Indian soldiers who fought in Russia against the red soldiers had a different story to tell. They had good words to say about the bolsheviks. They were saying that the communists were fighting for the poor and had established a government of the masses in Russia.

British imperialism was suspect in India. All news about the Russian revolution was taken by the reading public with a pinch of salt. Daily papers in India were giving distorted news circulated by the press agencies but people did not accept them as being truthful in their comments and editorials. In fact they were interpreting the negative news in positive terms praising in a subdued manner the courage the bolsheviks had shown in defeating their enemies, in capturing power and maintaining it. The opposite of British propaganda was accepted as truth by the intelligentsia of India.

About 1921 or so communist groups emerged in a number of towns—first in industrial towns. Such groups came into existence in Bombay, Calcutta and Kanpur at that time. Later they were established in Lahore and Madras. These Marxist groups became a new force emerging in India with great potentialities for development. Individual intellectuals began to talk and discuss about Marxism. Marxism started coming into India and began to be discussed by the working class youth and petty-bourgeois intellectuals.

Two industrial centres at that time were the first to take the initiative in forming communist groups: S.A. Dange in Bombay and Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta. They had the honour to be the first among those who worked for the foundation of the Communist Party of India. And still greater honour to them is that they remained loyal to communism throughout their lives.

But at that time there was no coordination in the work of these groups. It developed later on as we shall see ahead.

Communist leaders of the Russian revolution were, of course, most interested in spreading truthful news and the communist ideology. It was their international duty to do so. That helped them not only in strengthening their hands against the enemies of their revolution but also brought them supporters and allies

as well. This in turn helped and strengthened the communists' work in India and other countries.

Pioneering work in this connection was done by M.N. Roy by forming party groups in Moscow and in Germany. He sent Nalini Gupta to secure information about the situation in India and to convey to friends and communists in India the need for the formation of an all-India communist party.

Government intelligence reports say a lot of things about his activities. He carried on correspondence with labour leaders in India, wrote pamphlets on *India in Transition*, *India's Problems and Its Solution* and *What Do We Want?* These pamphlets were proscribed but a number of copies did get through. He advised Indian comrades to form a regular communist party in India with a non-offensive name. He suggested for it the name 'People's Party' with dual organisation—legal and illegal.<sup>1</sup>

With the decision of the Third International that it was the duty of the communist parties in the imperialist countries to help build communist parties in the colonies under their rule, the Communist Party of Great Britain began to make efforts to help the growing Indian working class in that direction. The British communists began to work among the Indian working class, build trade-union movement and help form communist groups in the industrial centres of India. It was a difficult job they had to perform. British imperialism was very vigilant in respect of the entry of British communists into India. Only a few British communists entered India despite great difficulties. Very soon they were found out and sent back to Britain. Ashley was arrested and sent back to England. Campbell was arrested and put behind bars. But later on, with genuine passports Ben Bradley, Philip Spratt and Lester Hutchinson succeeded in coming to India and they did good work for the trade union and communist movements in India.

In fact, working class of India owes a great debt to the CPGB and especially to R. P. Dutt for winning over to communism many Indian students who had gone to England. Some

1. M. N. Roy was later expelled from the Communist International. He left the movement and founded an organisation called Radical Humanist Movement which ended in smoke.

of them became members and sympathisers of the Communist Party of India and are working in the party today as respected leaders in various fields—national and international.

### 3. Peshawar Conspiracy

British imperialists did not want communism to take roots in India. It began to do propaganda that Indian traditions go against any form of communist ideology. It united the propertied classes that supported British imperialism wholehog. British rulers were determined from the very beginning not to allow communist ideas to penetrate into India through air, land or sea.

But new ideas, specially communist ideas, cannot be imprisoned or hanged by the neck till they are dead as they have no necks. No walls, however high, can prevent their entering any country if they are true to life and heave of life. That is why communist ideas began to enter India in seen or unseen ways.

Influenced by Hijrat movement, many muslim youths left the Punjab and Sindh and went to muslim countries in the summer of 1920—Afghanistan and Iran—to fight against British imperialists for the restoration of the khilafat in Turkey. The allied powers had designed to partition Turkey, thus reducing the position of the Caliph to a virtual non-entity. The Khilafat movement exhorted young men to escape from British tyranny by migrating to Turkey to fight for their Caliph.

They were very shabbily treated by the Afghan government. They were denied food, asked to eat from their own pockets. The atmosphere was very suffocating. They felt imprisoned and wanted to flee from there. They crossed the Hindukush mountain, suffering great hardships and reached the Soviet Union where under the influence of the October Revolution and its achievements they studied communism and became communists and a number of them got together to form the first Communist Party of India in Tashkent.

Inspired by the new perspective given by the Russian revolution, they decided to return to India in small groups to work for the Indian revolution. On their way back, they were arrested on the borders and lodged inside jail.

We have studied the British imperialist policy of hatred and hostility towards communism. The British Indian government had planted spies among the muhajirs and received reports from them about the activities of the muhajirs who had crossed over into Soviet Russia and had remained there for some time. They had gathered information about their activities in Tashkent and Moscow. As soon as they began to come back into Punjab in batches or singly, they were arrested and conspiracy cases were launched against them.

These conspiracy cases were launched, not on the basis of any concrete action of theirs in the British Indian territory in the Punjab against the British raj but on the basis of having come into contact with Soviet ideology and the Russian revolution. It was pure and simple communist thought which these muhajirs had learnt in Soviet Russia which the British Indian rulers were prosecuting in their courts of justice (?)

The British rulers did not want to take any chance by allowing the muhajirs to move about freely in the Punjab, talk about the victorious Soviet revolution and what it was all about. No. They arrested them as soon as they set foot in the Punjab and cooked up conspiracy cases against them and passed barbarous sentences on them. What for? For having communist ideas.

The first conspiracy case judgement was given on 31 May 1922 and the last one ended in 1927. In between this period, about five bolshevik (or Moscow) conspiracy cases were launched and heavy sentences were pronounced against the accused. For instance Akbar Khan was given seven years rigorous imprisonment including three months in solitary confinement; Mohammed Hussain, five years rigorous imprisonment including 3 months in solitary confinement; and Ghulam Mehboob (Peshawar) five years rigorous imprisonment including three months in solitary confinement. This was the second case tried by the session judge Fraser who delivered the judgement on 27 April 1922.

Shaukat Usmani was arrested on 9 May 1923. The *London Times* on 12 May 1923 wrote maligningly about 'Bolshevik activity in India' saying that an alleged agent of Moscow had been arrested and conspiracy case had been started against him under Section 121-A (waging war against the king-emperor to overthrow him) and to impress the world against communists it wrote: Proscribed literature and suspicious correspondence have been found with him. The authorities are taking drastic action against the bolshevik agents. And it further added:

"Of late most striking activity has been intensified not so much by direct agents as by extremist politicians who have imbued bolshevik notions, and have seen in bolshevik propaganda useful and effective means of carrying on agitation against the government."

The *London Times* spearheaded the anti-communist propaganda in the world. Next day on 13 May it reported under the headlines 'Red Agent in India sent for trial'. His arrest would lead to revelations in regard to Soviet propaganda in India. He had been touring the country, organising groups and disseminating bolshevik propaganda. The documents recovered indicate that he had been receiving instructions constantly in regard to plans for propaganda and also financial help from bolsheviks outside India. He would be tried in Peshawar.

The allegations levelled against Shaukat Usmani were all cooked up, fabricated and unfounded. This was pure propaganda stuff, as usual, without any real basis, as the trial also proved.

Shaukat Usmani was individually tried in a supplementary case and sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment under the bombastic Section 121 A. The *London Times* and its ilk knew how to make a mountain out of a mole hill.

The main conspiracy charge was against (1) Abdul Majid; (2) Habib Ahmad, (3) Rafiq Ahmad, (4) Feroze Din Mansur, (5) Sultan Ahmad, (6) Gauhar Rahman, (7) Mian Akbar Shah Khatak as coaccused. The judge on 18 May 1923 sentenced the first five to one year's rigorous imprisonment each and the latter two to three years rigorous imprisonment each. Ghulam Ahmad Khan and Fida Ali had turned approvers i.e. traitors and hence were pardoned and released.

A number of returnees got demoralised and gave up politics. It was very difficult to work in the reactionary landlord dominated muslim majority territory now in Pakistan. But a good chunk remained loyal to Marxism and continued working despite financial hardships and now and again suffering imprisonment. They were Mir Abdul Majid, Feroze Din Mansur, Shaukat Usmani, Fazal Ilahi Qurban and Gauhar Rahman.

Feroze Din Mansur died in harness and Abdul Majid is still alive.

#### 4. The Non-Cooperation Movement

The British rulers of India had foreseen an upsurge of freedom struggle of the Indian people following the victory of the allied powers in the first imperialist world war. They had therefore prepared two Rowlatt bills to meet the situation, i.e. to suppress the national movement for democracy and selfdetermination. The first was the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1917 which provided a strong court consisting of three High court judges with no right of appeal. The court was empowered to continue detention of dangerous characters already under control or confinement. Under this law the local government was given power to order persons to furnish security to reside in a particular place or to abstain from any specific act.

The second bill was the Criminal Law Emergency Powers Bill No 2 of 1919. Under it the possession of seditious document with the intention to publish or to circulate the same was punishable with imprisonment. It further provided that persons convicted of an offence against the state could be ordered by the court to execute a bond of good behaviour for two years after the expiration of their sentence.

The bills exposed thoroughly the intentions of the British rulers with regard to the promises of democracy and selfdetermination made during the war years to the Indian people. They were strongly denounced by the freedom movement and other

politically interested people. This was clearly going back on and breaking the promises earlier made. Mahatma Gandhi voiced people's protest when he said, 'We shall refuse civilly to obey these laws'.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919 and general Dyer' and O'Dwyer's statements in defence of that cold-blood mass murder made it quite clear to Indians what sort of democracy and selfdetermination were in store for them in the coming days. All these tragic happenings disillusioned the national movement's leaders thoroughly. There was no way out but to struggle for selfdetermination.

And the Congress and the Khilafat movements took up the challenge and decided to fight unitedly hand-in-hand. Both chalked out an identically revolutionary program to fight for swaraj. Civil disobedience movement was launched with a vengeance with the aim of achieving this objective. It was for the first time that a gigantic struggle was started against British imperialism.

At the call of the national leadership, the students gave up colleges and schools; lawyers gave up their practice in the British law courts; titled gentry threw away their titles and honours, peasants refused to pay their taxes and rents and the police and army men were called upon to resign from their services.

And the khilafat leaders issued a fatwa on the lines of the Congress program of struggle. It said: "It is not permissible to become members of the government councils; to plead as vakils before the British courts; to read in government or semi-government schools; to keep honorary magistracies, other honorary posts and the titles conferred by the government." And they declared "All government services by which government is helped are *haram* (forbidden), specially serving in the police and army is a great sin because they have to fire upon their brethren. "The fatwa also said that "one who kills a muslim deleberately will be subjected to eternal hell-fire."<sup>2</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi, Mohammed Ali, Shaukat Ali and Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew proclaimed that service in the police and army was *haram*. Excepting Mahatma Gandhi they were arrested

2. See File No 137, 1921: Home-Political.



and given heavy sentences. The Mahatma was not arrested due to Tej Bahadur Sapru's intervention.

"By the end of 1921 a tense situation had arisen in India. The acute strike movement of the working class, the actions of the Akalis in the Punjab, the Moplah revolt on the Malabar coast, the peasant movement in the United Provinces and the mass non-cooperation campaign led by the congressmen which had swept the country created a serious danger to the British rule."<sup>3</sup>

This civil disobedience movement armed with the revolutionary program instilled a new revolutionary spirit amongst the rural and urban people and brought about an unexpectedly huge upsurge in the country. Indian people began to see the realisation of their aspirations near at hand.

The British government, taken aback at this massive struggle brought into play all its weapons of repression and suppression to crush the movement. Leaders were arrested and put behind the bar. The police had their field day. They ran amuck, beating and killing people here and there and everywhere. Repression on UP peasantry was severe. They killed many people in Bareilly and still more in Chauri Chaura (Gorakhpur).

At Chauri Chaura police thana, the peasants got infuriated at the police repression and retaliated, killing all the policemen, officers and spies numbering 23, burnt down the thana together with the dead bodies on February 1922 and cut off railway communication between Chauri Chaura and Gorakhpur. This revolutionary action of the peasantry was not to the liking of Mahatma Gandhi wedded to non-violence. The movement was moving in a revolutionary direction and getting beyond his control.

In a hurriedly called meeting of available members of the Congress Executive Committee on February 11-12 in Bardoli, Gandhiji got a resolution passed calling off the struggle. The meeting denounced the violence of the people. The country was aghast over this panicky decision!

The congress executive decision convinced nobody, neither the youth nor Congress leaders already locked up inside jail. On the contrary it caused great dissatisfaction and resentment.

throughout the country. It pleased the British India government which heaved a sigh of relief and regained its peace of mind.

The resolution of the Congress Executive Committee passed in Bardoli was a complete surrender and apologetic submission by Gandhiji of his bonafides to the British imperialist rulers. It resolved "that mass civil disobedience contemplated in Bardoli and elsewhere be suspended..." and advised "the cultivators to pay the land revenue and other taxes due to the government". It advised the ryots that withholding of rents to zamindars is contrary to the Congress resolutions and "injurious to the best interests of the country" and the Working Committee assured the zamindars that "the Congress movement is in no way intended to attack their legal rights" and 'grievances' between them be redressed by 'mutual consultation' and recourse to 'arbitration'.

The Congress by this resolution wanted to put a complete stop to all political activity—voluntary hartals, picketing, voluntary processions and public meetings. It condemned "popular atrocities such as at Gorakhpur (Chauri Chaura) or hooliganism such as at Bombay and at Madras respectively on 17 November 1921 and 13 January 1922." But the peasant struggles went on for some time, though they could not continue for long without an alternative leadership.

The Congress, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi thus brought the whole political struggle to a complete dead-end and established the peace of the grave in the country in the name of non-violence and legal rights of the landlords and the employers. This betrayal of the peasantry resulted in the condemnation of 72 peasants involved in the Chauri Chaura incident to death and put off the achievements of freedom for a long time to come till 1947.

The British government in India was shivering in its shoes in the face of the revolutionary onslaught. Hindus, muslims, sikhs, etc. were unitedly taking part in the 'do or die' struggle. Students, lawyers, titled gentry and peasants were responding to the call of boycott boldly and the police and troops were getting affected by slow degrees. The situation was very favourable for the fulfilment of India's aspiration. But then, wonder of wonders, all of a sudden came the stab in the back by the

hands of the Congress. The struggle for liberation was sacrificed at the altar of non-violence.

Mahatma Gandhi's own colleagues and associates—Motilal Nehru, C. R. Das, Lajpat Rai who were in prison at that time were stunned and shocked on hearing this news of withdrawal of the civil disobedience movement. They sent letters of protest to Mahatma Gandhi full of indignation to which he coldly replied that men in prison were 'civilly dead'!

Nehru wrote about this withdrawal in his autobiography as follows: "We were angry when we learnt of the stoppage of our struggle at a time when we seemed to be consolidating our position and advancing on all fronts."<sup>4</sup>

Viceroy of India lord Irwin was in jitters. The weapon of repression was not succeeding in suppressing the movement. Just three days before the struggle was called off by Mahatma Gandhi, he sent a telegram, (Home) P No 155 dated 9 February 1922, to the secretary of state for India, London, which speaks volumes: "...Hitherto British rule in India has been carried on with the cooperation of the people of India and *for its continued success such cooperation is necessary,*"

This telegram he sent during the days of surging waves of civil disobedience struggle. It did not mean the Simon Commission which was appointed later on but something much more. At that time the British administration was too weak to face the new situation squarely. British rulers strengthened the state apparatus much later.

The Communist Party of India was yet in the formative stage. The all-India leadership has not yet emerged. It was therefore too weak to think of carrying on the struggle on its own. But communists in fairly good number participated in the movement.

The Bardoli resolution of the Congress taught the communists a number of lessons. It taught them in the concrete what Marxism had taught them in theory that the National Congress was a party of the bourgeoisie. The Congress resolution proved this truth in practice to the hilt. Marxism had taught them that the Congress would compromise with the British govern-

---

4. *Ibid.*, p 8.

ment to serve the interests of these classes, to prevent the struggle becoming revolutionary—that fact also stood substantiated.

## 5. Rise Of The New Force

Withdrawal of the civil disobedience movement created a political vacuum in the country. There was disgust and demoralisation in the people from Kashmir to Cochin. Leftwing congressmen, even some rightwingers, communists, leftist youth, socialist intellectuals were calling unprintable names against non-violence. Even its author Mahatma Gandhi was not spared.

There was a great opportunity before all the leftwingers to fill this political vacuum and come forward to continue the freedom struggle in one form or another. Favourable conditions were there for organising a common platform of struggle, to do something to remove demoralisation and take the country forward. That was the need of the hour.

And the British rulers knew that the Peshawar conspiracy cases had not halted or checked the communist movement, that it was making headway rapidly in industrial areas though slowly in the countryside. British rulers did not want to allow it to become a political force. Though small in numbers, the communists were spearheading the attack, along with other leftwing forces, on non-violence and Mahatma Gandhi. The attack was telling.

The British rulers did not want to take any chances.

The ink on the judgement of the main Peshawar Bolshevik Case had hardly dried up when the British rulers started preparations for the Kanpur Conspiracy Case. British bureaucrats were very much worried because communist activities were increasing in India itself. Impact of the Soviet Russian revolution on politically conscious Indians was so great that they could not but talk about and discuss its program as to how far it could be applied to Indian conditions. Communists and

their groups were emerging slowly and steadily almost in all provinces and were discussing the formation of the Communist Party of India.

The Russian revolution had surcharged the world atmosphere with communist ideas. Industrially developed provinces of Bengal and Bombay were the earliest centres of this discussion. Madras and Kanpur were also coming into the picture. The Peshawar conspiracy cases and the heavy sentences imposed on the accused has failed to prevent the communist activities entering India. Communist activities were growing despite repression and suppression by the British rulers.

We find that two opposite processes were going on and continuing side by side. On the one hand, Dange, Muzaffar Ahmad, Ghate and their other colleagues had set up communist groups and were trying to form a Communist Party of India. On the other the British Indian government was trying its utmost to obstruct and stop all communist activities and the emergence of the Communist Party of India. We know that the British government was underestimating the impact of the Russian revolution on the masses in India. It could not succeed in its efforts to stop the communist ideology, activity and the formation of the Communist Party of India.

By 1923 communist groups were formed in the industrial centres and towns. But there was no coordination among them as yet. Ideas of Marx were taking root slowly. Marxism which had created the Russian revolution was a terrible bug bear to the British imperialists.

S. A. Dange's name comes first among the Bombay group of communists. He was a student leader and took part in the non-cooperation movement. He wrote a booklet *Gandhi versus Lenin* in 1921 in which he criticised Gandhi's policies and upheld Leninism. And in 1922 he brought out an English weekly *Socialist*. No journal of this nature was there before. In British government's view Dange was the "directing spirit of communism in India." The *Socialist* attracted the youth and intellectuals towards communist ideology and thought.

In Calcutta Muzaffar Ahmad played a great role in bringing into being a communist group. He edited a Bengali daily *Nayug* in 1920 with the assistance of the revolutionary poet

Kazi Nazrul Islam, giving prominence to working class news. He was the first to make active and conscious efforts to sow the seeds of communism in Bengal.

In November 1923, Singaravelu Chettiar, an able lawyer of Mylapore, Madras, brought out a communist fortnightly *Labour Kisan Gazette*. He took pride in calling himself a communist and gave the slogan of labour swaraj. He participated in workers' struggles and suffered in their company. In an open letter to Gandhiji he sharply criticised his reformist policies.

Ghulam Hussain, a professor of Economics, also started a leftist daily *Inquilab* (Revolution) from Lahore in Urdu in 1922. After some time, despite making it a monthly, it could not continue. The Punjab government arrested him and he funked, turned a traitor and apologised to save his skin.

Thus we find that despite repression communist thought and activity was making headway slowly but surely. A new active and galvanising force was entering Indian politics to cause the greatest concern and headache to the British imperialist rulers of India. Intelligence reports of the British government show this great concern and anxiety at the growing communist ideas among the politically conscious people of India.

According to the British Indian government the bolshevik campaign in India had two aspects: Fomenting existing forms of unrest and the introduction of communist propaganda. The former has been in existence for a considerable time past, the latter has only lately taken definite shape.<sup>5</sup>

The British rulers were worried on another score also. A certain number of Indians who had been in touch with the bolshevik organisation had returned to India, some by sea, some by land. And their definite object was to do bolshevik propaganda. According to the government, those who returned were: Nalini Gupta, definitely a bolshevik agent returned via Colombo; Ali, a definite bolshevik agent, came openly from Basrah at Bombay; Usmani came by the same route, he was in India, but the government did not know his whereabouts and that of Shafiq, etc.

It is wellknown that Comrade Lenin was taking keen interest in the struggle for the liberation of India. The Communist Inter-

national through M. N. Roy was successful to certain extent in making and keeping contact with the Indian communists and other leftists whether in the Indian National Congress or outside it. M. N. Roy wrote dozens of letters to Indian communists emphasising the need of founding the Communist Party of India.

The *Vanguard* edited by M. N. Roy was printing a lot of material on the then current political situation in India. The journal was suppressed by the British rulers but according to government reports "a considerable number do get through" and that "their contents are used by some of the Indian newspapers who have adopted a communist tone in leading articles, notably so in the case of *Amrit Bazar Patrika* of Calcutta... pro-bolshevik articles commonly appear also in the *Independent* and *Khilafat Bulletin*."

M. N. Roy's letters to labour leaders, labour and political agitators and ex-detenus recommended over and over again that they should form a "regular Communist Party of India with non-offensive name". He suggested the name of such a party as the "People's Party with dual organisation, legal and illegal."

Stray copies of Communist International organ *International Press Correspondence* (Inprecor), though intercepted, were coming through and Red Trade Union's organs and its literature were also reaching India now and then.

From England the first paper of the CPGB *Worker's Dreadnaught* edited by Sylvia Pankhurst also was sent to India. In its 3 July 1920 issue it gave a picture of India's industrialisation and organisation of big strikes. Saklatvala was one of the organisers of the Indian Workers' Welfare League which organised Indian seamen on British and other ships which touched British ports.<sup>6</sup> Workers of this union at great risk did lot of labour to create contacts between the Indian communists, the CPGB and the Communist International.

The CPGB sent one of its members George Allison, a coal-miners' leader to India under the assumed name Donald

6. *Documents of the History of the CPI*, vol I, p 208 by G. Adhikari.

Campbell. He was moving secretly all over the country contacting trade union leaders. He was in touch with Joglekar in Bombay and with Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta. His assignment was to help the young communist movement in the country to get into trade unions and start a militant wing there.

George Allison was in Calcutta from November 1926 end to January 1927 (first two weeks). The CID hounds both in Calcutta and Bombay were keeping a close watch on his activities. His secret meeting with communist made him a suspect in the eyes of intelligence men. He met Saklatvala and Spratt in Bombay in the second week of January and then returned to Calcutta on 20 or 21 January 1927. Earlier he had given his passport for safe-keeping to Shibnath Banerji who had given it to Kalidas Bhattacharya, another trade union leader for the same purpose. On 22 January 1927 the rooms of Kalidas in Calcutta were searched and the passport of Donald Campbell was recovered. The very next day he was arrested under Cr.P.C. He stood his trial in Bombay in March 1927 and was sentenced to one and a half year's rigorous imprisonment.

Allison was actively helping the trade-union movement and was elected chairman of the Reception Committee of the All India Trade Union Congress on the eve of his arrest. He served his jail period in the Yeravda jail, was put in a ship and released in England.

## 6. Kanpur Conspiracy Case

All that has been stated above provided material to the British imperialists to assess and evaluate the evidence they could marshal against the accused and see if a case of conspiracy against the communist accused could be made out successfully. For a long time they were in two minds, consulting and discussing among themselves and with their legal advisers. After long cogitation and chewing the cud, they came to the



conclusion that the conspiracy cases could be proved successfully only if the accused were deprived of their right to have a jury. With this decision they went ahead because they knew they could manage the politically backward and selfish assessors easily.

The government's main purpose in launching this conspiracy case was to damn the Communist International, to do vicious and poisonous propaganda against communists showing them up as 'foreign' or 'Moscow' agents and the danger from their existence to the law and order and property thus winning over the propertied classes and terrifying the ignorants and the petty-bourgeois nationalists to have no truck or contact with the communists.

Muzaffar Ahmad was arrested in Calcutta on 19 May 1923 and Ghulam Hussain in Lahore about the same time. Ten days earlier Shaukat Usmani had been taken into custody. So three communists—Shaukat Usmani, Muzaffar Ahmad and Ghulam Hussain were already in government custody. The government of India asked the provincial governments of Madras and Bombay to arrest Singaravelu and Dange and detain them 'under the respective regulation'. Legal advisers had told the government that "it would be absolutely futile to stage a trial against these five under Section 121-A in Bombay, Calcutta or Madras." The remedy they suggested was to detain them under regulation 3 of 1818. The conspiracy trial could not be successful "in places where there was a jury and so detention without trial was the only remedy till conspiracy was properly cooked and held in a place where there was no jury."

Then Ghulam Hussain funked in July and apologised. The Bombay government objected to the use of Bombay Regulation against Dange. The action against Singaravelu was also postponed for similar reasons. Hence Dange and Singaravelu were not arrested.

On 20 December 1923 Nalini Gupta was arrested and he made a long statement showing that he had links with the Communist International and the emergent communist groups in India. After securing information from Nalini \* Gupta and Ghulam Hussain, the India government consulted the secretary of state

in London about the starting of a conspiracy case including Dange and Singaravelu in it.

The government took the decision to launch the conspiracy case on 20 February 1924 under Section 121-A against the eight accused. They were—(1) M. N. Roy, (2) Muzaffar Ahmad, (3) Shaukat Usmani, (4) S. A. Dange, (5) Ghulam Hussain, (6) Nalini Gupta, (7) Singaravelu and (8) R. C. L. Sharma. Of these, M. N. Roy was in Germany, Sharma in Pondicherry and Ghulam Hussain was never brought to Kanpur. Singaravelu was released on bail on 7 March 1924 and allowed to remain in his house. The Bolshevik Conspiracy Case began on 17 March against the remaining four accused, viz. Muzaffar Ahmad, Shaukat Usmani, S. A. Dange and Nalini Gupta.<sup>7</sup>

The burden of the charges was that the abovementioned communists had established relations with the Communist International and were determined to set up its branch in India the object of which is to deprive the king-emperor of his sovereignty in India. In pursuance of this aim M. N. Roy and others had communicated secretly and openly with each other. They also attempted to make use of an association of workers and peasants or a people's party under their leadership. Their association wanted to overthrow his majesty's government with the support and guidance of the Communist International which would be used as an instrument for securing "the complete separation of India from imperialistic Britain", by a "violent revolution". Hence conspiracy to overthrow the king, etc. And further, for the achievement of their objective 'the accused as well as others' circulated in British India newspapers circulars and pamphlets of a revolutionary character.

It was truly a prosecution of communist ideology. The charge of deprival of the king-emperor of his throne was merely a subterfuge to hoodwink the politically-unconscious people. The prisoners had committed no overt action to deprive the king-emperor of his sovereignty. They were fighting for national freedom in the same way as other nationalists were doing and organising the workers and peasants for that purpose. Love of freedom was their crime.

7. *Documents of the History of the CPI*, Vol II, pp-273-299, by G. Adhikari.

It was a foregone conclusion as matters stood that the so-called accused would be convicted and given heavy sentences. They were given four years rigorous imprisonment each by the session judge on 29 March 1924. Thus did the curtain drop on the Kanpur Conspiracy Case trial.

But did these heavy sentences prove deterrent to the spread of the communist movement? No, not at all. On the contrary, they spurred the working class leaders already working outside as well the petty-bourgeois intellectuals and other pro-revolutionary and revolutionary forces in the country to accept this imperialist challenge by continuing the work begun by the imprisoned comrades, by organising on a firm footing powerful organisation of the workers' and peasants' parties throughout India, coordinating their activities and establishing a real working class Communist Party of India with international links.

The trial played a part in the spread of revolutionary ideas among fairly wide circles of the working class and intelligentsia. It focused their attention on socialism. The proof of this is that soon after the sentences were pronounced an Indian Communist Defence Committee was formed in Bombay, which published an appeal to the Indian public and the CPGB to open a fund for the purpose of fighting to get the sentences annulled in the court of appeals and recognition of the right for Indians to form a communist party.<sup>7a</sup>

So new communist and pro-communist forces arose among the working class and petty-bourgeois intellectuals who defying the terror unleashed by British rulers boldly went ahead to carry on their revolutionary work without caring a damn for the consequences. The imprisoned comrades had done their duty by the working class to the Indian revolution well. Now it was the duty of the others to step into their shoes, shoulder the responsibility and take the country forward.

But before we proceed further, some observations have to be made with regard to the two bolshevik conspiracy cases—Peshawar and Kanpur. At the time of the Peshawar Conspiracy Case, there was hardly any communist or revolutionary movement in the country. There was <sup>\*</sup>no defence committee

---

<sup>7a</sup>. *Bombay Chronicle*, 21 June 1924.

worth the name to defend them. They had to depend mostly on their friends and relations for defence. The anti-bolshevik propaganda unleashed by the British press and the rulers had frightened the intelligentsia much. The prisoners were hardly befriended by anybody in the region ridden with big landlords who were out and out loyal to the British rulers.

But at the time of the Kanpur Conspiracy Case trial, local patriots under the leadership of Shri Ganesh Shanker Vidyarthi had set up a defence committee to look after the defence of the accused in the case. V. H. Joshi from Bombay and Abdul Halim from Calcutta were also contributing to the Defence Committee and helping the accused comrades in accordance with Dange's and Muzaffar Ahmad's advice.

Before their arrests the communist movement had advanced a little. Strikes had taken place in the textile mills of Bombay, Calcutta and Kanpur. The arrests of communists had created a feeling of resentment against the British rulers.

The Bolshevik Conspiracy Case did not overawe the communist prisoners. They stood their ground and showed their mettle in the trying and sessions courts.

The conspiracy case was meant to deny the communists the democratic right of political propaganda and association that is to say, the right to organise the workers and peasants and to form the Communist Party of India. The Communist Party of Great Britain was legal and could utilise civil liberties. But here in India, the communist party was illegal and imperialist dictatorship was ruling the roost.

The accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case challenged and bearded the British imperialist lion in its own den and made communist ideology ring throughout India—as we shall see anon.

On 27 March 1924 the *International Press Correspondence* (Inprecor) published an open letter from the CPI signed by M. N. Roy to the prime minister of Great Britain Ramsay MacDonald and other highups, in which Roy said:

“It is not we eight accused who are on trial in Cawnpore. It is the entire Indian working class and the idea of political agitation and organisation of the workingclass which awaits

the verdict of the court. The time-honoured charge of conspiracy is to damn the working class movement for social, economic and political emancipation as illegal." This is "to throttle the constitutional right of agitation, organisation and association which exists unchallenged in every part of the British empire." In this long letter M. N. Roy at the end asserted that if bolshevik propaganda is not illegal in Britain, why is it so in India? and if the CPGB is not illegal in Britain, why is it so in India?

And we can add that if the CPGB in Britain could publish papers, the communists had the same right to start newspapers to defend the interests of the working people in India.

## 7. Communist Party Of India Formed

The Kanpur Communist Conspiracy Case could not hinder the growth of communist thought and movement in the country. In the five years from March 1924 to March 1929 communist ideas and movement spread continuously under one cover organisation's name or another. We will trace and place before the readers the story of the growth of the communist movement in the next five years.

There was discussion among the Kanpur Conspiracy Case accused as to whether an open Communist Party of India be set up or not and whether it would be allowed to function. Dange was for setting it up. But while they were discussing the matter a person named Satyabhakta took the initiative and sent letters to whatever known communist groups were there to attend an open Communist Conference which was going to be held in Kanpur in the last week of December 1925.

The conference was held on the appointed dates. S. V. Ghate took part in it and was elected one of the general secretaries. He records about that Communist Conference as follows:

"We in Bombay decided to attend the conference. J. P. Bagerhatta, who was in touch with M. N. Roy, was in Bombay

and we together decided to attend the conference.” Ghatе further said that “the resolutions committee at the conference consisted of Satyabhakta, Joglekar, Bagerhatta, S. Hassan (Lahore),<sup>8</sup> Krishnaswamy (Madras) and Ghatе himself, Satyabhakta objected to the name Communist Party of India as he smelt bolshevik flavour and wanted the name to be Indian Communist Party. Ultimately our suggestion was accepted. The resolutions were placed before the open session on the third day. President. M. Singaravelu Chettiyar, two joint secretaries, Bagerhatta and myself and an Executive Committee were elected.”

Ghatе further adds: “Within four days Satyabhakta announced the formation of a new National Communist Party and left the organisation in the formation of which he himself was a party. When he was approached to hand over the minutes and documents of the conference, he refused to pass them on since he had established his own party.”

It was decided that the headquarters of the Communist Party of India were to be at Bombay. Ghatе further says: “We set to work in 1926. I remember we issued a manifesto in the name of the Communist Party of India against hindu-muslim riots and for communal unity.”

The other joint secretary Bagerhatta was expelled from the party in 1927 as a police agent. Then Ghatе became the general secretary of the party. Ghatе held this position till his arrest in the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case on 20 March 1929. <sup>9</sup>

Muzaffar Ahmad wrote an article on the Communist Conference in which he said: “Uniting the communists of various places we constitute for the first time the **Central Committee** of the Communist Party of India in Kanpur itself. The conference was openly held and, therefore, the committee was also constituted openly.” On this, he commented, “we had to face plenty of criticism, we deserve this criticism, but there was no other way either. Had we not joined the conference at

8. It seems his treachery remained unexposed.

9. *Documents of the History of CPI*, Vol II, pp 605-608, by G Adhikari.

Kanpur, the communist party of Satyabhakta would have hindered us considerably in the future."<sup>10</sup>

The Communist Conference received wide publicity in the press—both progressive and pro-imperialist. Reactionary papers voicing capitalist viewpoint poked fun at the conference. The progressive nationalist press took note of the fact cautiously. But a new phenomenon had emerged on the Indian scene—a phenomenon which heralded the leftwing politics in the country aspiring and desiring to unite the left and nationalist forces.

It was in Kanpur that the first all-India communist centre was formed. The Central Executive Committee was elected and a constitution was adopted. The conference brought together and united four communist groups of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Lahore under one banner—the red flag. They were represented in the Central Executive Committee duly. However, the CPI was still in the developing process. But it was noted that the Gordian knot had been cut and a beginning made.

There were drawbacks, no doubt. The CPI's attitude towards the Communist International was vague. A genuine communist party could not be organised openly, exposing all its leaders to imperialist enemies to be arrested whenever they liked. But weaknesses apart, it was a step forward—a basis which in course of time could help bring into being the genuine Communist Party of India.

The ultimate goal of the party was the establishment of a workers' and peasants' republic of India and the immediate object was the securing of a living wage for the workers and peasants through the nationalisation of land, mines, factories, etc. And to attain the above objective, the party was going to organise the workers' and peasants' unions.

From 1927 onwards communist activities spread still further. May Day, Soviet Revolution Day and Lenin Day—international features of the communist movement—began to be observed in different parts of the country. Articles appeared in progressive journals on the 10th anniversary of the Russian revolution.

10. *Ibid*, p 608.

The Peshawar conspiracy cases, the Kanpur Communist Conspiracy Case and the anti-bolshevik propaganda carried on by the British rulers created great interest among the youth and intelligentsia and they wanted to find out what bolshevism or communism really stood for, about which so much ado was being made by the British rulers of India. Foreign journals entering into India were of great help in securing some balanced information in this regard.

The Communist Party of India was as yet confined to small groups in a few industrially developed provinces of India. To become a real all-India communist party, it had yet to travel a long way and do hard and difficult spade work. Its hammer and sickle banner had been unfurled only in a few provinces where trade-union activities had begun purging the TUs of opportunist and pro-capitalist leaders who had captured them. The movement was still suffering teething troubles.

Soon Punjab came into the picture. Santokh Singh had attended the Kanpur Conference of communist workers. He started the Punjabi monthly *Kirti* (Worker) in February 1926, began propagating communist ideas in a very guarded way. He was one of the leaders of the Hindustan Ghadr Party movement in San Francisco, USA; he had gone to Soviet Russia, attended the Congresses of the 4th International and Red Trade Unions and had met some of the Soviet communist leaders. He had come to India to continue the national-freedom struggle by organising the workers and peasants of India.

Santokh Singh was a great revolutionary who had proved his mettle and bonafides in the San Francisco Conspiracy Case in America. He had studied communism in Moscow. He wrote about the Kanpur Communist Conference in the first issue of the *Kirti*. Unfortunately, he was fatally taken ill and died on 19 May 1927.

The death of Santokh Singh, according to a government report, caused a definite setback to the activities of the party in Punjab. In him they lost a capable organiser, a tireless worker whose pioneering work laid the foundation on which the movement had built ambitious schemes.



On his selection and advice Sohan Singh Josh became the editor in-charge of the *Kirti* in January 1927. The *Kirti* was the organ of the Hindustan Ghadr Party which had become communist-oriented after the defeat of its armed struggle in 1914-15. The new editor had some experience of building an organisation.

In the first issue of the *Kirti* Santokh Singh wrote an editorial note under the heading "Why did *Kirti* Appear?" in which he said: "Charkha and khadi were not the panacea for Swaraj. Mahatma Gandhi could not win swaraj within a year as he had claimed. Khadi has not harmed the British capitalists nor has it overawed them in any way.

"The call of the *Kirti* is this that Hindustan will have to pay for its freedom the same price as history proves other countries have paid for their freedom and as a free country has always to pay for the preservation of its freedom."

And he further added that India should not remain isolated from the world. "We are a colonial country, we should not see the oppressed peoples of the world as the oppressors do." The program of India's freedom should not only be based on conditions obtaining in India but also be based on the situation prevailing in the world. "In present times a country cannot come into its own unless its working class stands on its own feet" and so on he wrote.

## 8. Workers' & Peasants' Parties

Communists had understood the compromising nature of the Indian National Congress. The quintessence of the whole program of Mahatma Gandhi included compromising with British imperialists. Compromise with the British rulers was an inherent component of Mahatma Gandhi's political policy. Non-violent struggles were launched to create conditions for a compromise now on home rule, now on do-

minion status. The communists had learnt well the lessons of the Chauri Chaura debacle of 1918-1922 movement.

Marxism had taught the communists that the working class and peasantry were the principal and decisive forces in the struggle for national liberation. They decided to organise the workers' and peasants' parties in the country. Bengal comrades were the first in the field to do so. They organised the workers' and peasants' party in 1926. They were formerly organising the Labour Swaraj Party. They changed the latter into the Workers' and Peasants' Party.

Idea behind this organisation was that the legal communist party could not be used as a mass anti-imperialist organisation. Only the Workers' and Peasants' Party could fulfil that role. The organisation was the result of growing dissatisfaction of the broad masses with the compromising policy of the National Congress leaders. Freedom could not be won without organising the more or less 80 per cent of the working population.

Bengal comrades held the first conference of the workers and peasants in February 1926 in Krishnanagar (Nadia) where they changed the name of the Labour Swaraj Party into the Peasants' and Workers' Party. Later, understanding the key role of the working class, they changed the order into Workers' and Peasants' Party. Trade union work at that time in Bengal was weaker than in Bombay. But all the unions which existed in Bengal accepted the leadership of the Workers' and Peasants' Party.

The party published its own journal in Bengali *Ganarani*. It appeared on 12 August 1926 under the editorship of Muzaffar Ahmad. The journal's main emphasis was that national liberation could not be achieved without the organised mass struggles of the workers and peasants.

The second conference of the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party took place in February 1927 and it adopted the party's immediate and ultimate aims document.

The program declared that it was vitally necessary to create a political party of the working class, the peasantry and the lower sections of the middle class and that the Workers' and Peasants' Party met this necessity. It stressed that the chief aim of the Workers' and Peasants' Party was the establishment

of a federal republic where the means of production, distribution and exchange would be in the hands of the people and will be used in the interests of the society.

The program further advanced a number of immediate political, economic and social measures to improve the condition of the working people.

It also stressed that the main condition required to achieve these demands was that the country should become independent and freed from British imperialism and that to realise this aim, the party was prepared to work with other political parties in the country.

The program criticised the Indian National Congress for ignoring the interests of the working people. It pointed out that the Workers' and Peasants' Party would work to get the Indian National Congress devote its attention to the demands of the working class, the peasantry and the lower section of the middle class.

Thus, the program, despite its drawbacks, put forward the task of fighting for complete independence and proceeded from necessity of uniting for this purpose the working class, the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie. The program did not set the Workers' and Peasants' Party in opposition to the Indian National Congress but at the same time it did not define clearly its attitude towards the Indian National Congress.

The Workers' and Peasants' Party in Bombay was founded in March 1927 with S. S. Mirajkar as its secretary on the basis of a Congress labour group which existed there since 1925. The party published its own organ, the *Kranti*, a weekly in Marathi. The party had a fairly strong workers' section and it is natural that the communists had the greatest influence in it.

The Bombay Workers' and Peasants' Party launched its activities by publishing a comprehensive resolution which it had already put forward at a meeting of the All India Congress Committee in May 1927. The resolution expressed the party's point of view on the current tasks of the national freedom movement. A brief summary of the program is as follows:

(a) The Indian National Congress and its leaders as at present constituted represent the interests of the Indian proper-

ties classes. The bulk of the Indian population are not in sympathy with the work of the Congress.

(b) In the interests of the revolutionary majority of the people it is necessary to liberate the Congress from the fetters of class interests and to set before it the task of winning national liberation. The achievement of this aim will be the first step on the road to complete liberation of the masses from exploitation and oppression.

(c) The aim of the Indian National Congress should be complete national independence and the establishment of swaraj based on universal suffrage.

(d) The Congress should affirm that civil disobedience and 'direct action' are the only effective weapons with which the Indian people will put an end to their state of subjugation.

(e) 'Direct action' and 'civil disobedience' can be successfully used only if there is a general broad awakening of the masses.

(f) To ensure the earliest awakening of the masses, the Congress should immediately adopt a program of action aimed at improving the condition of the working people.<sup>11</sup>

The Bombay Workers' and Peasants' Party's stand with regard to the Indian National Congress was more definite and mature than the other provincial ones. The Bombay party did not set itself in opposition to the Congress as the above program shows but the party wanted to make the Congress more democratic and it wanted to transform it into an all India organ of struggle for complete independence.

The party demanded that the Congress adopts a program which accords with the interests of the working masses but it did not put forward the demand for abolition of landlordism. The Punjab Workers' and Peasants' Party was taking a left sectarian mistaken stand with regard to the Indian National Congress.

The third province was the Punjab where the Workers' and Peasants' Party was formed on the initiative of the Amritsar Kirti comrades on 12 August 1928. The Lahore comrades,

---

11. These facts are taken from *A Contemporary History of India*, pp 156-160.

group joined the party later. That shows the political backwardness of Punjab. The need of this party had been felt as early as April 1927 but it did not materialise then.

In September 1927 the Kirti group had convened a Labour Conference at Hoshiarpur with Sohan Singh Josh in the chair. A cable from the workers of Berlin conveying the greetings to the League Against Imperialism and asking the conference to affiliate itself with the league was received at the conference.<sup>12</sup>

Resolutions passed at the meeting, according to government reports, clearly indicated that the Kirti group stood for a socialist republic and was starting a new agrarian movement based on revolutionary methods.

Two factors helped the formation of the Workers' and Peasants' Party. One was the betrayal by the Indian National Congress of the interests of the peasantry as indicated in the Bardoli resolution and its pro-capitalist class policy vis-a-vis the working class. Second was that the patriotic youth and intelligentsia were disgusted with communal riots which were engineered and instigated by the British rulers in order to keep their stranglehold over India. The Kirti group which ran the *Kirti* magazine played a big role in founding the Workers' and Peasants' Party in the Punjab on secular and revolutionary democratic lines.

The second conference of the Workers' and Peasants' Party was held in Lyalpur on 29 September 1928. Comrades from Bombay and Calcutta were sent letters to come and attend the conference but none came. The reason for holding the conference at Lyalpur was to undermine the influence of the Zamindara League there and to release the peasantry from the influence of the landlords and big zamindars by exposing the true class character of the Zamindara League leadership. The conference in a certain measure did achieve its objective.

We held the conference in the open near the pandal of the Punjab Provincial Political Conference whose leaders had refused to permit the use of the pandal to us. The result was that after a short time of the starting of our conference the Congress pandal became empty because the peasants left that

12. See *Kirti* of October 1927.

pandal and came to the open conference. Many resolutions were passed in the conference emphasising the need for overthrowing British imperialism, for establishing complete national freedom and setting up a workers' and peasants' republic in India. In the speeches the gains of the Russian revolution for the working people were explained; nationalisation of wealth and removal of the British army from India were advocated.

The third conference was held at Rohtak on 10 March 1929. Sohan Singh Josh spoke against the philosophy of predestination and emphasised the fact that man as an individual as well as a class is the architect of his own fate. Broadly speaking, there were two main classes, the rich and poor and their interests were antagonistic to each other. The workers and peasants wanted to work for setting up their own government. The main problem was the land hunger of the peasantry. Unless that problem is solved, no improvement in their conditions could take place. Resolutions demanding reduction of the debt burden to the sahuikars, rent burden to the landlords and heavy taxes of the government were passed.

The party celebrated the Friends of Russia Week in the Punjab and many processions were taken out in the province under the leadership of the party demanding betterment of the condition of the workers. The party organised the press workers' union, motor-drivers' union and some other small unions of the workers.

The Workers' and Peasants' Party was formed much later in UP than the three provinces mentioned above. A Conference was called in Meerut in October 1928 by the provincial peasant and trade union leaders for this purpose. Muzaffar Ahmad and Spratt from Calcutta and M. A. Majid, Sohan Singh Josh and Kedarnath Sehgal from Punjab were called to address it. The organisers were mostly reformist congressmen but the secretary elected was P. C. Joshi who came into prominence later as the general secretary of the CPI and who later did much to put the CPI on a firm footing.

It must be noted that coordination of work was far off. British surveillance, lack of funds and communication difficulties stood in the way. The British government had a fool-proof

machinery of censorship. Hence the organisational principles of the workers' and peasants' parties were not always the same.

Communists were as yet inexperienced and theoretically immature in Marxist science and it was they who determined their policy and practical work. But the idealistic passion with which they worked spread the movement. Had they concentrated on building the working class party alone, the results would have been much more fruitful and profitable.

In the conditions prevailing in India at that time, the organisation of workers' and peasants' parties was of utmost political significance. "The slogan of struggle for real independence, one of the basic program slogans of the workers' and peasants' parties, began to win more and more recognition among the broad masses both outside and inside the Congress, and this was the tremendous service rendered by the Indian communists and the workers' and peasants' parties. The workers' and peasants' parties organised the masses in their active struggle against imperialism and in the fight for the class demands of the working class and the peasantry. All this had its effect on the development of the national-liberation movement." This is how *A Contemporary History of India* has summed up the situation up to the first half of the year 1928.

## 9. Simon Commission

The communist movement, in one form or another, was now making progress pretty fast. It was helped greatly by the visit of Shapurji Saklatvala. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's participation in the Brussels Conference of the League Against Imperialism and its effect on his political life also contributed towards giving a fillip to radicalisation of the movement. The other contributory factors were the slavery-tightening decisions of the British imperialist rulers.

In November 1927 British imperialists appointed the Simon

Commission to report on "Whether and to what extent it is desirable to establish the principle of responsible government or to *extend, modify or restrict* (?) the degree of responsible government then existing therein, including the question whether the establishment of second chamber of local legislatures is or is not desirable." The commission did not include even a single Indian not even a loyally cooperating Indian liberal! It was entirely composed of three British parties—Conservative, Liberal and Labour. Besides the terms of reference exposed loudly the intentions of British imperialists to tighten their stranglehold on India still further. We shall describe later how this affected the Indian national movement as a whole.

Further in order to shackle the working class still more in the interests of the imperialists and Indian capitalists the British Indian government brought forward two bills, the Trade Disputes Bill and the Public Safety Bill. In the name of curbing communist influence and enquiring into labour conditions, it appointed the Whitley Commission. These measures caused great resentment in India and led to countrywide agitation and awakening and accelerated the growth of the national movement.

## 10. Shapurji Saklatvala's Visit

Saklatvala's visit to India in the first quarter of 1927 infused a new fighting spirit for propagating communist ideology among the communists, would-be communists and sympathisers. He visited a number of cities and wherever he went he received a great welcome because he was wellknown as a fearless fighter for the cause of complete independence for India in the British parliament. His bold and forthright speeches on communism and the Russian revolution had endeared him to the Indian working people and intelligentsia.

Saklatvala's speeches in public meetings, in workers' meetings and in the youth and students' meetings held in Bombay,



Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Delhi, Lahore and Madras "served to focus the attention of the politically-minded people on the two points—(1) consistent anti-imperialist and democratic leftwing trend growing in the national movement; and (2) the growth of a militant trade-union and peasant movement under the red flag. Indian communists were also concentrating their propaganda and mass work on these very two aspects of the national freedom movement." He was throughout sharply criticising the Congress demand for dominion status and asking the people to fight for complete independence of India.

At the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party meeting on 26 February 1927 he emphasised the need for political training of the masses and making the Congress more representative of the poorer masses. He held the view that politics was as much the right and safety of the worker as the ruler. An all India workers' and peasants' party should therefore be organised to bring about a free state of life.

And then he said: Farewell should be bidden to the old civilisation and a new one boldly organised. And then in a moment of inspiration he dreamt a long-term dream which is yet far off from being materialised. He said in ringing words: "It would be a glorious day for Great Britain when a bolshevik India would come of itself as a true cooperating and living brother of a bolshevik Great Britain." (19 February 1927)

Saklatvala attended the session of the All India Trade Union Congress on 12 March 1927 in Delhi. The congress was dominated overwhelmingly by those who held extreme rightist views, who were all the while cautioning: look, think before you take any step; no talk of class struggle; no politics. The president of the session was a Rai Sahib.

Some resolutions were passed. One eulogised the services rendered by Mr Saklatvala for the cause of freedom for India; another condemned the despatch of Indian troops to China to protect capitalism. *The stage of political development at that time was such that some delegates objected to the use of the word 'capitalism' as it smacked of politics.* A resolution asking for the fixation of a minimum wage, sickness and unemployment allowances, equal wage for equal work and right of vote to adults, etc. was passed.

The April issue of the *Kirti* gives Saklatvala's speech. He said:

"As long as the workers do not become their masters, freedom has no meaning. The trade-union movement had been started to free the workers and this means overthrowing capitalism and establishing workers' own raj." Continuing further he said: "The task of the Indians has become much easier because they have the experience of the trade-union movement of other countries before them .. It behoves the Indians that they should strengthen the movement in association with the movements of other countries and India should find its place with other free countries."

He said: "The workers' movement is bringing about great changes in the world and the workers have to acquire power. Their movement came into existence in 1847-48 when Karl Marx wrote his *Communist Manifesto* of which the main objective was to overthrow capitalism. India should make a long jump and fill the void between 1848 and 1928. All means of production should be taken in hand and do not care a penny for those who speak against the workers' movement. The time is coming when the capitalists will not be able to give quit notice to the workers, but workers will be serving a notice on the capitalists to quit."

Concluding his speech, he said, "In the coming period the trade union leaders are going to be the rulers of the country. We shall not waste time on trivialities but take the time by the forelock."

Karl Marx's death anniversary fell on 14 March 1927. This provided an opportunity for the Marxists to get together and hear Saklatvala's views on Marx and Marxism. Muzaffar Ahmad was elected to the chair.

In some introductory remarks one speaker said that the Russian revolution not only strengthened our national struggle for liberation of India but it also brought communist ideology to India. The muhajirs and later Ghadr Party leaders who went to Soviet Russia and got acquainted with Marxism there returned to India. Some of them got arrested and some escaped the dragnet of the British police. They enhanced the number of communists and the strength of the communist movement.

Dr Bhupendranath Dutt of Calcutta had gone to Soviet Russia. He gave his impressions about the developments taking

place in India and how Russia under workers' rule was making progress with great strides. He told the audience that history of man was the history of class wars. One class dominated over the other in its own interests. Workers in the capitalist system produced wealth for the dominant capitalist class while themselves got steadily impoverished. The rich were becoming richer and the poor poorer. To get rid of exploitation, means of production should be brought in the hands of the society.

Saklatvala was given a thunderous applause when he rose to speak. He said: "... There is no justice in the world. Here the law is: You produce and I will eat. Producers of wealth—workers and peasants are living in very bad conditions. They have neither clothes to wear nor houses to live in, nor have they anything to eat... Those who built houses had to live in thatched holes, but those who never handled a brick become owners of big houses". And raising his voice he said, "Those who owned cars were, truthfully speaking pickers of pockets.

Saklatvala dilated on a few aspects of religion. 'Religion', he argued, "should remain confined to a temple or to a mosque. It should not create quarrels in our social life. Change is working in the world... We are slaves because we have not changed."

One of the audience asked him to tell how they carried on administration in Soviet Union. He explained: In India only two per cent of the people had the right to vote. But in Russia every adult person of 21 years of age had the right to vote and can exercise it as he liked. Here a judge could sentence a man as he liked, a superintendent of police can oppress the poor as much as he liked, nobody could remove him. People's voice here had no value. In Russia it was not so and then he explained that people could remove a judge or a superintendent of police even.

In a short span of life, Saklatvala explained, the bolsheviks have eradicated illiteracy. In India only 5 per cent are literate while in Russia, despite the civil war, their literacy had gone up to 82 per cent and they are teaching all people from childhood to 40 years of age and beyond. In 1930 there would be no illiterate person in Russia.

Another important point he told the listeners was that the Soviet Government looked after the needs of life of the working

people first and foremost. After the harvest their requirements were satisfied as a first priority. After replying to all the points raised, he appealed to the people present to become communists and advised the government and the Congress to send a joint deputation to Soviet Russia to study the living conditions there for six months and come back to tell the people here truthfully what they saw there.

His visit inspired comrades everywhere he went, creating a good impression on the people as an outspoken and honest communist. It removed many doubts raised by opponents of communism and helped the communist movement to be pushed further.

## 1. Saklatvala-Gandhi Correspondence

The biggest service that Saklatvala did in 1927 to the communist movement in India was his correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi. Read the pamphlet *Is India Different? The Class Struggle in India—Correspondence on the Indian Labour Movement and Modern Conditions between Saklatvala, MP, and M. K. Gandhi* and you will enrich your political and economic understanding of the problems facing our country in 1927. Not only that. You will understand properly and precisely where M. K. Gandhi stood as to industrialisation of the country, labour and capital relations and other matters in regard to class struggle. It will show you the politically and economically mature views of Saklatvala and confused and immature views of Gandhiji on problems under discussion. The pamphlet has great educative value even today.

Gandhiji was anti-class struggle and wrote in one letter in reply to Saklatvala: "I do not regard capital as the enemy of labour. I hold their coordination to be perfectly possible." He further wrote, "One word as to policy. It is not anti-capitalist. The idea is to take from capital labour's due share and no more and this not by paralysing capital but by reform among labour

from within and by their own self-consciousness . . . Its direct aim is not in the least degree political."

It is clear that Gandhiji was against workers' hartals, against class conflict and class organisation because he did not want to paralyse capital. He was also against working class participation in political matters. His whole philosophy was based on trusteeship theory—the capitalists and landlords are the trustees of the interests of workers and agricultural labourers. He did not believe that the latter were exploited by the former.

A reading of the pamphlet will elucidate many problems facing the country today. It will show how out-of-date Mahatma's views were.

R. P. D. is right when he says in his foreword that by means of this correspondence "published in full throughout the Indian press, Saklatvala has struck a doughty blow at Gandhism and social pacifism in India, and stirred up young India as it has not been stirred for generations."

## 12. Jawaharlal Nehru & Brussels

Jawaharlal Nehru came very much to the fore after the Brussels Congress of the colonial peoples. Earlier he was somewhat exclusively under the influence of Gandhian politics. He was in Europe since 1926 and was in live touch with Brussels Congress preparations which were being made by the anti-imperialist patriots and revolutionaries for the freedom of their countries from the yoke of imperialism—British, French and others.

This congress founded the International League Against Imperialism And For National Independence. Among the leaders of the league were—Soong Ching Ling (Madam Sun Yat Sen), Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, Lansbury, Mohammed Hata, Willy Muenzenburg. Leading figures in the national-freedom movements of Asia, Africa and South America and militant leaders of the trade unions and labour movements of the imperia-

list countries of Europe and America took part in the congress. Nehru took part in the proceedings of this congress from the beginning to the end. He himself writes:

"I arrived in Brussels on the evening of 6th of February, 1927 and took part in the informal meeting." He was elected to the Presidium. He had a mandate from the National Congress to represent it in the Anti-Imperialist Congress. He issued a statement to the press saying: "It has been a matter of great shame and sorrow that the British government should venture to send Indian troops to China to coerce the Chinese." The Indian National Congress had strongly condemned this and expressed the hope that the Chinese nationalists would soon liberate their country.

One resolution of the congress signed by the Chinese, British and Indian delegates was characterised by Nehru as the most important resolution. It was moved by the British delegation. This resolution, Nehru emphasised, was meant to commit its sponsors, the British delegation, to fight for complete independence (of India and other colonial countries under the British heel), to oppose war credits, to carry anti-imperialist propaganda among the soldiery and it recommended "direct action and strikes to prevent movements of munitions and troops to India and China."

He added "The resolution was really meant to bind the British signatories who are affected mostly by it, but to some extent it binds me as the Indian signatory also. I trust the resolution will have a good effect on India in lessening the extraordinary mentality which clings on to the British connection in spite of everything and especially in regard to the army occupation of India."

The resolution stressed complete independence and the withdrawal of all occupation forces of British imperialism from India and China.

It is not within the scope of this booklet to discuss in detail the resolutions passed by the Brussels Congress. We are interested here in the effect that it made on young Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru himself speaks about it as follows:

*"The Brussels Congress, as well as the subsequent committee meetings of the League, which were held in various places from*

*time to time helped me to understand some of the problems of colonial and dependent countries. They gave me also an insight into the inner conflicts of the western labour world... As between the labour world of the Second International and the Third International, my sympathies were with the latter."* (emphasis added).

From the above it is not difficult to conclude that Jawaharlal Nehru shed many an illusion held by congress leaders in India about the good intentions of British imperialism willing to grant selfgovernment to India. And his visit to Soviet Russia in 1927 November along with his father Pandit Motilal Nehru broadened and enriched his mind politically. On returning to India he began to influence the Indian National Congress in a leftward direction.

In his confidential report to the Working Committee of the Indian National Congress, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said: "The Brussels Congress, regarded from any point of view, was an event of first-class importance and it is likely to have far-reaching results."

### 13. Jawaharlal Nehru & Madras Congress

Jawaharlal Nehru played an appreciable role in taking the country leftwards. In the Madras session of the Indian National Congress he moved a resolution on the aim of the Congress bring complete national independence of India. The meeting of provincial units of the Indian National Congress earlier had shown an emerging trend towards radicalism. The propaganda of complete independence for India carried on by Saklatvala, by the League Against Imperialism and the workers' and peasants' parties was having its impact on Indian politics. The mood of the masses was changing. Nehru's reports to the National Congress on the resolution of the League Against Imperialism were having their effect on the Congress leadership.

The presidential address mentioned about the international solidarity with the oppressed peoples of other countries fighting against imperialism. The Congress session passed a resolution approving of official participation in the Brussels Congress Against Imperialism by Jawaharlal Nehru and welcomed its formation.

Nehru welcomed the suggestion by Dr Hardikar to send a medical mission to China to give the Chinese people medical relief and assistance in their war of liberation against British imperialists. But the British rulers refused to issue them passports to enable them to leave India. This aroused anger amongst the intelligentsia and politically-aware people in the country.

In another resolution the Congress session expressed deep resentment at the Indian troops being sent by the British Indian government to further their imperialist designs in China and to prevent the Chinese people from winning their freedom. The Congress demanded the withdrawal of Indian troops and police forces from China, Mesopotamia, Persia and from British colonies and foreign countries where they might be.

The resolution on 'war danger' moved by Jawaharlal Nehru was very important. It declared, in part, "The Congress demands that these war preparations be put an end to, and further declares that in the event of the British government embarking on a warlike adventure and endeavouring to exploit India in it for furtherance of their imperialist aims, it will be the duty of the people of India to refuse to take any part in such a war or to cooperate with them in any way whatsoever."

Most of the resolutions passed by the Madras Congress were declarations of intent and not a call to struggle. But the most important resolution that was to be put into practice shortly was the one on the boycott of Simon Commission which said that "the only self-respecting course for India to adopt is to boycott the commission in every form." It called upon the people and the Congress organisation in the country—(a) (1) to organise mass demonstrations on arrival and in the various cities which the commission may visit; (2) raise public opinion and propaganda to effectively boycott the same; (b) Not to give evidence or participate in social functions in its honour;



(c) Not to sit or serve on select committees; (d) Not to attend the legislatures except to keep their seats; (e) Secure cooperation with a view to make the boycott effective and complete.

The speeches delivered in the session stressed the need to secure workers' active support for the freedom struggle. Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose were elected general secretaries of the Congress for the year 1928. In November 1928, the All India Independence League was organised with Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose as its leaders.

Our Bombay comrades Joglekar and Nimbker were members of the AICC and the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee. They showed their mettle and tried their best to make the Indian National Congress adopt the Workers' and Peasants' Party program. They took the initiative to place the complete independence resolution before the Madras Congress session which was accepted by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in a changed form, softening it to a certain extent. Joglekar seconded it. The resolution on war danger was seconded by Nimbker. Both the comrades did their utmost to strengthen the left trend in the Indian National Congress and move it leftwards.

Saklatvala was not allowed by the British rulers to attend the Madras session of the Indian National Congress. He sent it a long and meaningful message, in which he said—"The might of tyrants holds me away from my countrymen. Many have tried this trick before, to save their ill-gotten empires, but not one has yet really succeeded."

Speaking about repression on the stalwarts of the national freedom movement, he expressed his happiness that "thanks to the teaching of the communist movement, British boys like Allison and Spratt stand up for the rights of (Indian) people to be free..." He advised the Madras Congress to "Awaken the working masses, organise the toiling peasants; take these myriads of India's toiling children right inside our national organisation by direct affiliation, discipline them within their trade unions, within all-India Workers' and Peasants' Party for direct economic passive resistance that can dry up the resources of imperial power and prosperity."

Saklatvala severely lambasted the British Labour Party on

the Simon Commission for having become partner in the imperial game of the capitalist rulers of the British empire.

The Congress session was over on 28 December 1927. In the same pandal the 'Republican Congress' was held. It was presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru and was opened by Sambamurthy who said, "At Gauhati republican movement gained considerable force. General Awary took the lead. His idea was India should be a federation of the united states of India. It should be remembered that this idea was propagated by the Hindustan Ghadr Party some ten years back." General Awary was in jail and on hungerstrike.

The chairman of the Reception Committee said, "Russia has shown that even the most autocratic empire can be overthrown to the dust and a people's republic established."

Jawaharlal Nehru in his speech expressed the view that the Republican Congress should be a leftist consolidation working to move the Indian National Congress as a whole more leftwards.

The Madras session of the Indian National Congress, according to Nehru, changed the direction in which the Congress had been moving till then. Since the failure of the non-cooperation movement, the Congress had been drifting towards the middle class or babu politics and was losing the support of the masses. Various forces at work today were likely to shape the future of the country. It is important for them to form some kind of an organisation to keep the National Congress up to the mark.

The resolutions adopted in the Republican Congress were almost the same as the ones adopted in the Congress session. A leftwing group emerged in the country which was the achievement of these two congresses.

*A Contemporary History of India* sums up the results of the Madras Congress as follows:

"Its resolutions in large measure, reflected the developments such as the growing anti-imperialist mood in the country and increased pull of the leftwing in the Congress. At this session the Congress for the first time passed a resolution, moved by Jawaharlal Nehru, calling for complete national independence of India. Its adoption, however, did not yet mean that the

‘Congress leadership was really prepared to fight for its realisation. Indeed, the resolution was more of a declaration than a call to struggle and aimed at retaining the Congress hold upon the masses. At the same time, it voiced the increased demands of the now stronger national bourgeoisie and was meant to demonstrate to British ruling circles that in any future revision of the Government of India Act, the Indian bourgeoisie was determined to secure greater concessions than previously. Jawaharlal Nehru admitted that the resolution on independence ‘did not represent then, as it did a year or two later, a vital and irrepressible urge on the part of the Congress; it represented a widespread and growing sentiment.’”<sup>12a</sup>

## 14. Simon Commission Boycott

We have seen so far how the left trend grew within the national movement and the part, however small it be, the workers’ and peasants’ parties played in bringing this about and strengthening it. Now we shall see how the British imposition of the Simon Commission and the anti-working class bills helped the anti-imperialist movement to grow stronger. We shall take up the Simon Commission first.

The response to the call for boycott of the Simon Commission was tremendous and countrywide. Almost all parties, except the sycophant ones, stood for boycott. But every class, casteist or communal party had before its eye its own class axe to grind. No party, not even the Indian National Congress, despite its Madras resolution on complete independence, was serious in fighting the British government to wrest complete freedom from its unwilling hands. Only exception was the Workers’ and Peasants’ Party and the Communist Party of India which was getting organised and slowly gathering strength.

<sup>12a</sup>. *A Contemporary History of India*, p 167.

3 February, 1928 will remain a memorable day in the history of our anti-British government movement. It was on that historic day that the Simon Commission landed in Bombay. Vast masses of Bombay were already on the street to give the commission a hot welcome. The bourgeoisie showed its true colours on the very first day of the hartal and demonstration. Congress leaders were calling upon the workers to 'refrain from work' but the bourgeoisie categorically refused to close their mills and factories on that day in Bombay!

The wave of anger against the Simon Commission was rising high all over the country. In all towns of the country there were hartals, demonstrations, one-day strike, defiance, boos and pooh-pooh against the Simon Commission crew's arrival in India. People were greeting the commission by hurling defiance at it in one way or another.

In Bombay there were two separate demonstrations and meeting—one organised by the National Congress leaders and the other by the Workers' and Peasants' Party. The textile workers, the railwaymen, municipal workers, workers from other branches of industry—together numbering 30,000 proletarians of Bombay marched through the streets lined with imperialist police and soldiers and shouting their topmost voice "Down with British imperialism!", "We want nothing short of complete independence!", "We want the convening of the Constituent Assembly elected on adult franchise basis!" A new social force had entered the political arena against British imperialism, taking its due place in the struggle for political freedom.

Slogans raised in the meetings and demonstrations organised by the Indian National Congress were "Go back Simon; No representation, no commission; swaraj (a vague and undefined word) is our birth right!" All this amounted to giving up the complete independence resolution of the Madras Congress and demanding some sort of representation on the commission. Congress leaders wanted somehow or other to restrict the surging anti-Simon commission movement to serve their bourgeoisie ends only.

In Madras on 3 February the masses came out on the streets. They threw to the winds the restrictions imposed on them by

the local congress committee and spread over the whole city. They were infuriated by the police fire. They took up whatever came to them handy, stones, brickbats, etc. and hurled them at the police. They laid siege to the imperialist institution of oppression called the High court and destroyed it by setting fire to it. They made enemies of the people their main target.

The mass protest demonstrations with flourishing placards and the strikes that took place on 3 February in Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and other places in the country were so militant that the British government had to resort to opening fire to quell the 'riots'. Thousands of demonstrators were beaten up, hundreds were wounded and arrested. Hundreds of unknown heroes sacrificed their lives for freedom. In Calcutta 'order' was restored with the aid of armoured cars which drove up and down its streets.

The Simon Commission hastily left Bombay for the capital Delhi. They found it impossible to hold a public reception to the commission in Delhi. Even the Central Assembly members refused to welcome Simon. Further, the assembly, on a motion moved by Lala Lajpat Rai on 18 February, "resolved to have nothing to do with the commission in any form or at any stage". Only the British, the Anglo-Indians and the landlords opposed the resolution which was carried by a 68 to 62 vote.

In some cities effigies of the chairman of the commission Sir John Simon, as well as Birkenhead, Baldwin and Ramsay MacDonald were burnt just as they do of Ravana and his cohorts on the Dussehra day. It meant that the masses had flung a challenge to the authority of British imperialism, telling it that it had no right to impose any British-made constitution on India and that it was the privilege of Indians alone to do so. Britain had no right to judge whether India was fit to govern itself or not.

The Simon Commission had members of three important parties of Britain—the Conservative, the Liberal and Labour. Jawaharlal Nehru, on his arrival from Europe on 22 November, 1927 said correctly in a statement in Colombo that the British Labour Party's attitude was imperialist and a future Labour

government would be as objectionable as a Conservative one. The colonial world rightly began to dub the Labour Party government as labour imperialism.

A big eye-opener in this respect was the first British Labour government. Though its life was very brief, it sanctioned in 1924 the Bengal State of Emergency Act whose object was to suppress the revolutionary movement in that province. No less forcefully was the party's imperialist character revealed by the inclusion of two Labour Party members in the Simon Commission.

Saklatvala consistently and persistently exposed the Labour Party's imperialist character. In an open letter to the parliamentary Labour Party, he pointed out "The policy of the Labour Party with regard to this commission was a gross mockery not only of the direct interests of the British workers, but of socialism and international working class solidarity as well."

The Indian working class upto then was under the influence of the British trade-union movement. The latter had a mind to subject the former to the ideological and organisational influence of British reformism. As to the freedom question, all the British parties were united to keep India under the British heel. The differences between the three was that between tweedledum and tweedledee.

Another incident which sharpened the anger of the Indian people against British imperialist rulers and strengthened their will to fight the commission tooth and nail took place at Lahore on 30 October 1928 where Simon & co went a second time. British troops and police attacked the countless demonstrators waving black flags brutally lathi-charging them right and left. Lala Lajpat Rai, standing in the front line of the demonstrators, was buffeted about and severely beaten by the police and the deputy superintendent of police Saunders himself. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya was himself there to see this incident. Lalaji succumbed to the blows and died on 17 November 1928.

Two doctors issued a statement to the press saying that "the injuries received by him on October 30 had undoubtedly hastened his end." The whole country was shocked. The anger,

fury and resentment of the Indian people knew no bounds. November 19 was observed throughout India as Lajpat Rai Day.

## 15. Anti-Working Class Bills

The established workers' and peasants' parties were getting better organised and new ones were coming up. The communist party was increasing its units in the working class areas and striving to extend its organisation to other provinces. Bereft of any monetary resources, with zeal in their pockets and courage and conviction in their hearts, communists were taking the communist ideology and organisation wherever the situation demanded. Anti-communist propaganda of the British rulers was helpful in that it created a desire in the inquisitive people to know what exactly communism was. Soviet Russia, communism incarnate, was a great attraction for the Indian people.

On top of it there were the British communists sent by the CPGB to India who lived on equal terms with the poor, down-trodden mill workers, assisting them in organising their trade unions, working shoulder to shoulder with their leaders, living and eating with them which lowered the prestige, dignity and authority of the ruling white sahibs! This crying contrast disturbed the ruling white class to the hilt. The presence of white communists encouraged the workers to set at naught the authority of the white sahibs and helped the communist movement. Because of this, the British rulers could not tolerate the presence of British communists in India. They had to be packed off from India, sooner the better.

With this object, the British rulers brought forward a bill titled the Public Safety Bill. It was in fact a government safety bill, having nothing to do with public safety. Removal of foreign friends from the midst of the people can truly be called people's enemies' safety bill. In concrete terms, the bill was meant to remove one of British working class's best sons, Ben

fury and resentment of the Indian people knew no bounds. November 19 was observed throughout India as Lajpat Rai Day.

## 15. Anti-Working Class Bills

The established workers' and peasants' parties were getting better organised and new ones were coming up. The communist party was increasing its units in the working class areas and striving to extend its organisation to other provinces. Bereft of any monetary resources, with zeal in their pockets and courage and conviction in their hearts, communists were taking the communist ideology and organisation wherever the situation demanded. Anti-communist propaganda of the British rulers was helpful in that it created a desire in the inquisitive people to know what exactly communism was. Soviet Russia, communism incarnate, was a great attraction for the Indian people.

On top of it there were the British communists sent by the CPGB to India who lived on equal terms with the poor, down-trodden mill workers, assisting them in organising their trade unions, working shoulder to shoulder with their leaders, living and eating with them which lowered the prestige, dignity and authority of the ruling white sahibs! This crying contrast disturbed the ruling white class to the hilt. The presence of white communists encouraged the workers to set at naught the authority of the white sahibs and helped the communist movement. Because of this, the British rulers could not tolerate the presence of British communists in India. They had to be packed off from India, sooner the better.

With this object, the British rulers brought forward a bill titled the Public Safety Bill. It was in fact a government safety bill, having nothing to do with public safety. Removal of foreign friends from the midst of the people can truly be called people's enemies' safety bill. In concrete terms, the bill was meant to remove one of British working class's best sons, Ben



F. Bradley and his colleagues Lester Hutchinson and Philip Spratt from the country and deport them.

It was an enabling bill, empowering the government to deport undesirable European British subjects from India and to confiscate money sent to them from abroad. Previously law did not allow an Englishman to be deported without his consent in writing. The government had earlier deported B. G. Horniman, editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, but he came back to India. The police could not prevent him landing in India because he threatened to take the matter to the courts.

The Public Safety Bill authorised the local (provincial) authorities to take emergency measures if they considered the position in the province to be a threat to law and order. Most reactionary amendments were sought to be moved whose purpose was to make it extremely difficult for political organisations in India, in particular the communist organisations, to maintain contacts with the international labour movement.

Congress leftwing leaders opposed this bill forcefully. Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography bears testimony to this. He hailed the young working people's (Soviet) state, which at that time was the only country building a socialist society. Pandit Motilal Nehru, addressing the Indian Legislative Assembly said: "Can you erect barbed wire entanglements and artificial barriers to keep ideas out of India? The times are gone when you could do it. The men (communists) I have known are men of opinions, strong opinions, no doubt, but men with the courage of their conviction... Such men, whether you agree with them or not, must be entitled to the respect of every well-balanced mind."

The Public Safety Bill and the Trade Disputes Bill both were rejected and were sent back for review.

The Trade Disputes Bill was a direct attack on working class organisation. It was divided into three parts. The first part provided for the appointment of compulsory courts of enquiry and conciliation boards for the settlement of industrial disputes. The second made it illegal to withdraw labour from the

public utility services, such as the railways, postal services, water and light supply and public conservancy, unless each individual going on strike gives one month's notice in writing to the administration. The third part declared illegal strikes which had any object other than or in addition to the furtherance of trade dispute within the trade or industry in question, or those strikes which inflicted hardships on the community or were intended, in the opinion of the government, to coerce the government. The bill also prohibited sympathetic strikes and the workers of one industry supplying funds to strikers in another.

Even the government labour nominee on the Legislative Assembly N. M. Joshi, most moderate trade union leader, opposed the bill. He said, "In a state of society where capitalists dominate the government, the law is bound to be used against workers. I shall have to oppose the bill." The Legislative Assembly passed the Trade Disputes Bill into an act in 1929.

The government of India in its annual statement of 1929-30 admitted that "communist ideas, nevertheless, continued to spread among various sections of industrial proletariat and also, to some extent, in rural India... It is significant that several youth associations have adopted communist symbols and doctrines. The communist movement continues to be a source of anxiety and to demand constant vigilance on the part of the authorities."

To leave no loopholes for the communists to escape from their dragnet, the British authorities appointed the Whitley Commission, beside the enactment of two anti-labour laws detailed above. The declared objective in sending this commission from London to India was to enquire into labour conditions in India and *seek ways of combating communist influence*. Most workers' organisations resolved to boycott the Whitley Commission and in January-March 1929, many protest meetings and demonstrations against this commission were held under revolutionary slogans.

## 16. Workers' and Peasants' Party Conference in Calcutta

Communists were consolidating and centralising their activities, organisation and movement. Workers' and peasants' parties were gathering strength and spreading. The Communist Party leaders wanted to unify the scattered communist groups which had come into existence under the red flag. Groups existed in Bombay, Bengal, Madras, Punjab and UP.

The main purpose behind holding the first workers' and peasants' parties conference was to centralise their activities and unite the communist movement in India.

In his presidential address at the first All-India Workers' and Peasants' Parties Conference held in Calcutta on 21-23 December 1928 Sohan Singh Josh stressed the need for centralisation. He said, "In our respective provinces we have gained power that is to count with. But in working provincewise not only is there a danger of differences rising among us but also there is disadvantage in our power being divided. By uniting all parties into one central body, we shall acquire a power that will carry weight. This central body has been long overdue..."

Delegates from four provinces—Bombay, Punjab, United Provinces and Bengal attended the conference and in addition many representatives of trade unions and sympathisers participated in it. Madras comrades did not come.

From amongst the delegates, Ben Bradley's speech was most outstanding. He was a prominent leader of the amalgamated Engineering Workers' Union of Britain and a member of the CPGB. He emphasised the necessity of establishing the Workers' and Peasants' Party of India and analysing the international movement for freedom from imperialism, he assured the conference of the sympathy and solidarity of the revolutionary working class forces of Britain and Europe. He said this on the strength of the resolution passed by the Brussels Anti-Imperialist League about India described earlier.

The conference received fraternal messages of greetings from the League Against Imperialism and the Communist International and other organisations.

The conference adopted in a slightly amended form many resolutions. Most important of them were: political resolution, resolution on the trade-union movement, a short statement on the principles and policy of the party, formation of the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party, acceptance of its constitution and its affiliation to the League Against Imperialism. And last but not the least, a resolution on kisan demands with the stress on organising them around these demands.

The political resolution of the conference noted that on the appointment of the Simon Commission, the Indian bourgeoisie assumed an uncompromising attitude, came out in support of the resolution for independence and the Republican League approved of hartals, but later on when the All-Parties' Conference was convened and the bourgeois leftwing had to choose between the masses and their class, they choose the latter, and put forward a compromise proposal with imperialism in the Nehru Report.

The Nehru Report was entirely a bourgeois-democratic scheme. The masses did not come into the picture at all and in the states they were completely left to the mercy of the princes. The report made the following principal demands.

(1) Complete responsibility for an Indian parliament elected by universal suffrage in regard to internal affairs including finance, customs, taxation, etc.; (2) Rights of the individual of a bourgeois democratic type including a special safeguard of private property rights but including also some freedom for trade union organisation, etc.

In return for this the report concedes:

(1) Foreign affairs to be conducted on the same basis as those of the dominions; (2) Executive powers to be nominally vested in the king, acting through nominated governor-general and governors; (3) No discrimination against British financial, commercial and industrial interests; (4) The armed forces to be under the control of a committee consisting partly of ministers and partly of British officers; (5) Existing pay, etc. of present civil and other officers to be guaranteed, their resignation volun-

tary; (6) Indian states remain under their present regimes but keeping relation with the Indian government.

This was complete retreat from the position taken by the Indian National Congress a year before. It was a betrayal of the peasantry and the working people as a whole. But as we know today, British imperialists rejected this Nehru Report lock, stock and barrel.

The Nehru Report, in one word, exposed thoroughly the lip-service of the bourgeoisie to the demand for complete independence.

The program put forward in this connection was to expose the Nehru Report as a whole. To destroy imperialist political military control in order to achieve complete independence; to insist on the independence of the labour movement from bourgeois control, to conduct class struggle against the exploiters of the working people, to abolish landlordism without compensation; and to draw population of the princely states along with the masses of British in the struggle for the total abolition of the princely states.

The aim of the working class was stated as nationalisation of land and industry, a civilised existence, a government of the workers, an economic system for the benefit of humanity, and peace. In short the function of the working class in history is the realisation of socialism.

To achieve this aim it was necessary for the proletariat to win the leadership of the national-liberation movement.

The Trade Disputes Bill was condemned and it was decided to launch a general strike if it was passed. The government was condemned for detaining comrades under the Regulation III of 1818, for not releasing Andaman prisoners after their sentences had been completed; and last but not the least, for the action of the British rulers in arresting J. W. Johnston, the fraternal delegate from the League Against Imperialism who was on his way to attend the session of the All India Trade Union Congress and this conference of the Workers' and Peasants' Party.

## 17. 43rd Session of the National Congress

The 43rd session of the Indian National Congress was held at Calcutta in the last week of December 1928 under the presidency of Motilal Nehru. The most debated subjects in this Congress were the Nehru Constitution and complete independence as the aim of the freedom struggle in India. There were sharp differences between the leftwing and rightwing Congress leaders on these two issues.

The resolution on the Nehru Constitution was welcomed by the Congress "as a great contribution towards the solution of India's political and communal problems...and while adhering to the resolution relating to complete independence passed at the Madras Congress" the Congress approved the constitution "as it represented the largest measure of agreement attained the important parties in the country."

The resolution further said that if it is not accepted "on or before the 31 December 1929... the Congress will organise a campaign of non-violent non-cooperation by advising the country to refuse taxation..." etc.

And further "...nothing in this resolution shall interfere with the carrying on in the name of the Congress of the propaganda for complete independence."

This was the main resolution of the Congress session worded very shrewdly. The Congress was so eager to compromise with British imperialists that it was ready to accept even a water-down dominion status as adumbrated in the Nehru Constitution allowing the leftwing Congress leaders to carry on propaganda for complete independence and be satisfied with India's aim as dominion status because an ultimatum of one year had been given to the British government.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra moved amendments accepting the recommendations of the Nehru Committee with the addendum that "there can be no true freedom till the British connection is severed." In the Congress session speech Jawaharlal Nehru said, "I am for complete\* independence, but I am not against full dominion status, provided I get it before it loses all attraction."

Communist Party members Joglekar and Nimbkar moved an amendment to it dubbing it as 'totally unsatisfactory and unacceptable' the reasons being that it safeguarded the vested interests, land-owning feudals and capitalists and sacrificed the interests of the masses; that it recognised the titles of the princes perpetuating their tyrannical and undemocratic rule over the states people; that it allowed the exploitation of the human and national resources of India by foreign capital; that it guaranteed the right of private and personal property acquired by questionable means and the payment of all foreign debts; that it placed the armed forces of the country partly in the hands of the British officers and gives executive powers and power to veto to the governor-general and governors, etc.

The amendment in the end declared that the aim of the Indian National Congress was the attainment of complete national independence based on political, economic and social equality entirely free from British imperialism.

The amendment was lost by an overwhelming vote.

Among other resolutions, one, longish one, was on the future reformist activities of the Indian National Congress and another more important resolution passed condemned the government's action in arresting and deporting without trial J. W. Johnston, fraternal delegate to the Congress session from the League Against Imperialism, considering it as a deliberate attempt to prevent the Congress from developing international contacts.

Communists and trade union leaders brought a demonstration of 50,000 workers from Lillooah and other mill areas. The demonstrators entered the congress pandal, occupied it for two hours and passed a resolution setting achievement of complete independence for India as the goal.

The leaders of the Indian National Congress wanted to keep the masses under their control. They did not like their becoming revolutionary and going beyond their reformist program. They wanted to yoke them to the political bandwagon of their organisation. Strike actions of the working class in 1927-28 had frightened them. All the great strikes on the railways, in the steel industry, in the textile industry, in the jute industry were fought more or less under the leadership of the communists or leftwing trade union leaders. British capitalists

on the one hand and the Indian bourgeoisie on the other, having common interest in exploiting the masses were alarmed by these developments and they advocated legislative measures calculated to check the revolutionary development of the working class movement. The Indian *Daily Mail*, organ of Bombay's textile capital wrote—"Since the general strike, the attitude of the workers has completely changed. The men have become rebellious, obstinate and somewhat defiant. They are extremely suspicious of the employers... This mighty tug-of-war between the masters and the wage-earners was for a period unprecedented in the industrial history of this country, and the way in which labour held its own against their powerful enemies has engendered in the workers' minds an awakened sense of their strength and importance... The workers have learned such theories as 'labour is the source of all wealth', and 'labour alone creates value' etc. All these and lot more of such ideas have been instilled into the minds of the workers... They now refuse to be regarded and treated as a despised class..."

The journal further went on to say "during the general strike and even after it, the workers were under the influence of extremist leaders who were either avowed communists or members of the Workers' and Peasants' Party. The workers had learnt these ideas from a handful of young radicals who taught them theories of communism and class-war."

This was the reason why the national bourgeoisie feared becoming revolutionary.

## 18. Youth and National Freedom

There was a great anti-imperialist upsurge among the youth of India. This fact was taken note of by the national leaders as well. Referring to this awakening among the youth all over India Subhash Chandra Bose said, "The youth movement appeared under different names in different provinces, but the impulse behind it was the same everywhere. There was a feeling of impatience and revolt at the rotten state of affairs—



a sense of selfconfidence and a consciousness of the responsibility which they had towards the country."

In 1927 and 1928 the Youth Leagues began to have a political direction towards scientific socialism. The Russian revolution influenced and inspired them. They worked, more or less, under the leadership of the workers' and peasants' parties and took active part in the demonstrations and hartals against the Simon Commission. The politically conscious among the youth did not like the compromising policy of the leaders of the Indian National Congress and especially those of Mahatma Gandhi. Withdrawal of the 1918-1922 civil disobedience movement because of the Chauri Chaura incident had shocked them one and all. This withdrawal and the political vacuum created by it revived a terrorist trend among a section of the youth as well.

Youth were very impatient and wanted to awaken the people from slumber by resorting to heroic terrorist actions. They did not have the patience to do day-to-day work of organising the workers and peasants. What they wanted was quick results. They could not wait. They were against Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence. They resented condemnation of their terrorist actions by the Indian National Congress. Terrorism retarded the working class movement and laid it open to governmental repression. Later they came to know that the Congress wanted to keep them away from the communist movement. Most of them afterwards came over and joined the Communist Party.

The Workers' and Peasants' Party and the Communist Party organised them in youth organisations. They also did some work for organising the students. The Bombay Workers' and Peasants' Party was ahead of all others in this regard. Leadership of the workers in Bombay had by and large come from student struggles and movement. Young Workers' Leagues were organised in Calcutta and Bombay. The Workers' League in Calcutta did lot of work among the rural poor and fought not a few battles against the landlords.

According to Moni Singh's report, the terrorists of Bengal came into contact with the leaders of the Workers' and Peasants' Party and organised an independent revolutionary

Young Communist League. In four districts of Bengal they formed these organisations. Mymensingh played a leading role in this work. Four centres of the league were Calcutta, Dacca, Kishoreganj (in Mymensingh) and Malda town. Kishoreganj branch was the most active one.

The Young Communist League began to organise the rural poor in its branches against the landlords and the usurers (sahukars). The Kishoreganj communists advanced the slogan for abolition of landlordism and the system of usury. They organised meetings and explained their program to the people. The government came to know that they were preaching class struggle. Their office was searched. The police officer warned them that they would not be allowed 'to poison the atmosphere of the country'. The movement went underground. The government banned the Young Communist League.

Leading members of the Calcutta Young Communist League were Dharani Goswami, Gopen Chakravarti and Jalaluddin Bukhari. The YCL had its branches in Bombay, Karachi and Lucknow. Bhagat Singh was the organiser of the YCL in Lucknow. They were inspired by the book *Through the Russian Revolution* which they received from the Bombay YCL.

After 1928 the Kishoreganj branch of the YCL fought heroically against the landlords of the area. Their slogans were "We won't starve to death!" "We will seize the granaries of the landlords and distribute the grains to the peasants!" Furthermore they wanted to get back the signed deeds given to the landlords and sahukars for securing loans which were going up by leaps and bounds and no amount of repayment could wipe them out.

Leaders of the movement were arrested on the eve or after the Meerut conspiracy case arrests.

The Lahore Naujawan Bharat Sabha had done some good work among students from March 1926 to April 1927. It was formed by the legendary hero Bhagat Singh and his companions. It was more a secret organisation than an open one. The British government prohibited the college authorities from allowing the organisers to hold any meetings inside the college boundary. The sabha withered away for lack of work.

The new Naujawan Bharat Sabha was set up by the Amrit-

sar Kirti group in April 1928. It spread to many towns in a very short time and attracted the attention and ire of the government. It did lot of work in running down the Simon Commission and dominion status, popularising the ideas of complete independence and socialism.

It declared its objective to secure complete independence for India in cooperation with other leftwing parties in the country, to establish a government of the workers and peasants, to instil the spirit of selfsacrifice and patriotism in the minds of young men and women and to take part in non-communal democratic and secular movements.

The sabha did lot of propaganda work against the Simon Commission, against the Trade Disputes Bill and the Public Safety Bill and for boycott of British goods. They celebrated and organised a 'friends of Russia week' in the towns where they had their branches.

The sabha organised its branches in Amritsar, Lahore, Ludhiana, Jullundur, Gujranwala, Montgomery and Sargodha. In addition to this, two tahsil branches—Jaranwala and Telanganj and one village branch in Morinda were also organised.

The government was taking notice of the activities of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. One intelligence report said that the sabha was attempting to capture various unions in Amritsar, e.g. the Mechanical Engineers' Union, the Railway Porters' Union and the Press Workers' Union.

The government arrested its leading members immediately after the murder of Saunders, deputy superintendent of police on 17 December 1928 by Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev even before the arrests in the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case were effected.

## **19. All India Trade Union Congress Eighth Session in Kanpur**

The 8th Session of the All India Trade Union Congress held from November 25 to 28 1927 was a historic one. Not only were the resolutions on the economic demands of the working

class passed in the session but political resolutions on national and international problems were also discussed and adopted. It was in this congress that communists and leftwing trade unionists, for the first time, made their presence felt and worked in a coordinated manner. The session was held in the background of great struggles fought against retrenchment and increased workload.

Messages for the session were received from the CPGB and the Executive Committee of the IFTU and individuals. The message from the CPGB referred to "the brave fights of the workers of Bengal-Nagpur railway" against the deliberate attempt "of the government and the railway board to destroy their union." This evoked condemnation on the part of organised workers in all parts of the world. Referring to the "struggles conducted by the workers in Madras and Bombay this year", the message said that they have "demonstrated not only the growing strength of Indian labour, but also the fine spirit of class solidarity that animates the Indian working class." These events, it said, demonstrate that Indian trade unionism is no longer in its 'infancy', but actually poised for greater struggles that lie in front. Concluding, the message referred to the historic struggles of the workers and toiling people of Russia and India which show "how it is possible, even in an industrially backward country, to overthrow the rule of imperialism and to build the firm foundation for socialism."

Before the session opened, N. M. Joshi, general secretary of the AITUC, reported before the Executive Committee that a sum of Rs 13,605 had been received from the USSR Council of Trade Unions, Moscow.

President Diwan Chamanlal in his address spelt out the mind of the congress when he said about the Simon Commission, "We have nothing to do with it" and added, "from this platform I call upon the British Labour Party to withdraw the two labour members from the commission."

The British Labour Party had sent its delegates to influence the decisions of the congress. But the Indian working class, by then, knew the true pro-imperialist nature of the Labour Party which had never dissociated itself from imperialist policy in India. British delegates failed to win over the Indian

working class movement in order to subordinate it to the interests of British imperialism.

The congress passed a resolution on the boycott of the Simon Commission and called upon 'the parliamentary Labour Party to withdraw the two labour representatives' from the commission which it never did lowering itself in the eyes of the Indian working class still further.

A few resolutions were passed on the initiative of the communists, e.g. a resolution was unanimously passed congratulating the USSR on its 10th anniversary. Another resolution adopted condemned the refusal of passport to Saklatvala. Two resolutions, one condemning the encirclement of the USSR by the imperialist states and provoking war and another one expressing sympathy for the work of the Pan Pacific (Trade Union) Conference were rejected by the president. Their motion that the TUC affiliated itself to the League Against Imperialism also could not get through.

The Trade Union Congress session showed that communists were steadily making headway in the trade-union movement. This alerted the Indian bourgeoisie who began to intensify their efforts to gain supremacy over organised labour. This was reflected in the reports of Diwan Chamanlal, a prominent congressman, national reformists also became increasingly active in the workers.

In all 32 resolutions were passed in the session, most of them concerning the demands of the workers. Communists and other leftwingers submitted proposals on all the principal questions on the agenda. They forcefully brought before the congress their viewpoint that the Indian working class movement should have no truck with the British Labour Party and that the Labour Party's activity be branded as imperialist.

President Diwan Chamanlal wound up the session with the following meaningful words:

"I call upon you, comrades, to raise the banner of your ideals, demanding nationalisation of land and industry, a civilised existence, a government of the workers and economic system for benefit of humanity and peace."

This reflected the mood of the working class of the time.

## 20. The Working Class Struggles

In the early stages of the working class movement, Indian workers had not even elementary rights whatsoever. They were at the mercy of the employers who had all the rights. The employers could exploit them in any way they liked. The hours of work were not fixed and workers had to work according to the whims of the employers for 10 to 12 hours (even more) a day.

The workers had to fight big struggles in order to get the hours of work reduced, to win the right to strike and form trade unions. It was imperative that a union must be registered, otherwise the workers could be prosecuted for a criminal breach of trust if they went on strike. Workers fought heroic struggles to tide over all the hurdles which blocked their march forward by making untold sacrifices.

It was none of the business of the employers to provide any amenities of life to meet the rising cost of living through any dearness allowance, to keep them in good health or tolerable living conditions. It did not matter to them if they lived in hovels not fit for animals even to live in. What mattered to them was to mint as much profit as they could out of their blood through merciless exploitation.

Class struggle and class solidarity are the great teachers of the working class which have chiselled them into a great force in the society of today. They have learnt their lessons from their teachers and created powerful trade unions for collective bargaining with their employers.

We will take a number of important struggles which the working class fought in the big industrial centres in India and came to its own. In the All India Trade Union Congress, they have forged a powerful weapon to stand them in good stead. We have already made a mention of it previously.

In 1927 (April-May) a strike was forced on the workers of the Madras oil company by the dismissal of one hundred and fifteen men without assigning any reasonable excuse. The union sent five representatives to place the workers' case be-

fore the employers who refused to recognise the union. The strikers persuaded the company's transport workers to join the strike. Company bosses were so infuriated that they took law into their hand and fired on the strikers, wounding 17 of them.

This action of the employers consolidated their ranks and made them firm in their resolve to continue and extend the strike. The very next day the strike spread to the two other oil companies. In the following week scarcity of petrol caused a big rise in the prices in Madras and the employers getting alarmed offered to negotiate. Meanwhile the workers realised their united strength. Representatives of labour organisations in Madras backed them firmly and a proposal to call a general strike was mooted. This made the high and mighty employers to climb down. On 16 May the oil company announced that the dismissed workers would be restored to their jobs and other grievances of them remedied. The workers won a big victory because of their class solidarity.

Another important strike of this period was that of the textile workers of the Apollo and Manchester mills of Bombay. The workers took out a huge procession on 14 August 1927 demanding—no three looms, no wage-cut, no retrenchment and asking for dearness allowance and right to strike. Their slogan was: 'Workers refuse to starve to fatten the rich'. Mirajkar and Joglekar were leaders of this strike.

Since the 1925 general strike, Bombay's textile millowners were planning to introduce rationalisation which would increase the workload and lead to retrenchment of workers. In July-August 1927 the lead was given by the Sassoon group of millowners who introduced increased workload in the weaving and spindle sections of Manchester and Appollo mills. There was a sharp reaction against this innovation among the workers and they came out on strike against the attack.

The Manchester Mill workers broke down after 3-4 days and went back to work. But the workers of the Appollo Mill continued the strike under the leadership of the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal tenaciously for over a month and won a partial victory. The employers agreed to hold in abeyance the scheme of rationalisation and increase of workload.

But this holding back of rationalisation and workload was only

for a short time. The management of the above two mills was only biding time and cooking up plans to introduce rationalisation and increase workload at the cost of workers' labour. They introduced three looms working in place of the earlier two. Workers understood the meaning of this scheme.

Four thousand workers came out on strike against this attack from the millowners. It was the thin end of the wedge because the Manchester and Appollo mills had been selected by the millowners for the new experiment. If it succeeded, they would introduce it in all the other textile mills.

This time the workers were well organised and determined to carry the struggle through. The Workers' and Peasants' Party of Bombay rendered yeomen's service to the strikers by helping them to organise picketting against the blacklegs. Despite all their efforts the employers did not succeed in finding any blacklegs.

Preparation began to be made to give a call for a general strike. The millowners seeing the determination of the strikers and the threat of the general strike had to abandon their plan for introducing rationalisation and increasing workload. The strike ended in complete victory of the workers.

*Eastern and Colonial Bulletin* of the Red International of 15 January 1928 wrote on Bombay workers' victory, "Many trade unions have been set up with the direct participation of the workers' and peasants' parties. A big textile strike was conducted by the Bombay Workers' and Peasants' Party in August 1927 ending in complete victory for the workers."

The workers' and peasants' parties organised big demonstrations on May Day 1927 and celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Russian revolution with great enthusiasm.

The general strike of Bombay textile workers was the result of gradual accumulation of grievances over cut in wages, living conditions, longer working hours, use of abusive language, etc. The millowners were smarting under the concessions they were compelled to make to the striking workers. They again brought back the rationalisation and increased workload scheme. They were revengeful.

N. M. Joshi, leader of the recognised Bombay Textile Workers' Union was so cut-off from the workers that he did not know



the grievances of the textile workers at all. He admitted this when the strike began to spread and take on the form of a general strike. He had held back the workers up till then. But the time was gone when he could prevent workers from going on a general strike.

On 23 April 1928 the police opened fire on a peaceful procession of the textile workers, killing one and wounding some others. On 26 April, the Gimi Kamgar Mahamandal declared a general strike. The mahamandal, the revolutionary union of the workers, was led by communists. It had come into existence to meet and resist the offensive of the millowners.

The worker killed was Parasuram Jadhav who was appealing to his fellow workers to organise a general strike. Jadhav's funeral turned into huge demonstration and it became a signal for the workers to go into action. One hundred and fifty thousand textile workers of Bombay downed tools, causing all the textile mills in Bombay city to be closed.

After some haggling, a strike committee was set up consisting of representatives of both the revolutionary and reformist-led unions. Mass meetings and demonstrations were held to win people's sympathies. Workers began picketting at the mill-gates to prevent blacklegs entering mills.

On 3 May the strike committee presented following demands to the millowners: No more wage-cuts, pay rise for workers getting less than Rs 30 a month; an end to rationalisation and no discrimination against lowercaste workers. The last demand showed that the workers were becoming class conscious and politicalised under the leadership of the communists.

Divisive forces were organised to disrupt the movement. British authorities tried to provoke hindu-muslim riots by use of the pathans as strike-breakers. Communist leaders exposed the machinations of the enemies and organised a 500 strong volunteer crops who kept the blacklegs out of the factories and maintained hindu-muslim unity in the streets.

The millowners were banking on the idea that the strikers would not be able to continue for long. Starvation would bring them to their knees and the workers would come running to the mills. They were sadly mistaken. The Workers' and Peasants' Party organised collection of foodgrains in the villages for the

strikers to keep the pot boiling. In the meanwhile, contributions to the strikers' relief fund began to pour in from abroad because the news of the Bombay workers' heroic struggle spread far beyond the country's borders. Contributions were received from the textile workers in Lancashire and other industrial centres in the capitalist countries and also from the textile workers of Moscow. The Workers' Welfare League of London also sent some amount to sustain the strike. This was expression of international solidarity of the working class.

Many relief centres were opened and 80,000 were being given relief at these centres. The Bombay Municipal Council refused to sanction any relief to the families of the strikers at the instigation of the millowners' representatives.

The press noted that both sides in the dispute appeared to be stiffening in their stand. This tug-of-war undoubtedly intensified the class nature of the struggle. The Indian bourgeoisie was firmly collaborating with the British capitalists and running down those who went about preaching the gospel of strike.

As the strike continued, the millowners began playing a hide-and-seek game. Workers knew well the owners' tactics of disruption. The strike was in full swing when some left trade unionists and communists were arrested in the Meerut Conspiracy Case on 20 March 1929.

## 21. BNR Workers' Strike

The most important strike of this period was the second BNR workers' strike. The strike was forced on the workers because 2000 railwaymen were retrenched. A committee of enquiry was set up to go into the question of retrenchment. The union also took part in the enquiry. The committee came to the conclusion that a certain number of workers had to be retrenched. The retrenched workers were given some special concession with a promise that as and when vacancies arose, they would be absorbed. The strike was called off.

The question whether it was a lock-out or a strike was settled in favour of the workers. The committee held that it was a lock-out and hence full wages for the period of the lock-out were paid to the workers for three months. It was the prospect of a general strike on the railways that forced the railway management to concede the workers' demand for full wages for the lock-out period.

But the government did not keep its promise to take back the retrenched workers. Retrenchment and rationalisation was carried on the railways at the expense of the workers. It led to the SI railway workers' strike of 1928 and the GIP railway workers' strike of 1930.

It was help from the Russian workers and a little help from the British TUC which enabled the Kharagpur railway workers to hold out for three and a half months and came close to final victory. If the national movement had come to their assistance and a general strike of the railway workers had been called, they would have surely won complete victory.

As soon as the strike of the BNR workers came to an end, the SI railway agent on 9 September 1927 announced that there would be reduction of staff on the SIR. Tremendous retrenchment was on the agenda. Agents of the railways wanted to dismiss at least 75,000 workers who were already in ferment.

Towards the end of January 1928 the SIR workers held a conference at Nagapattinam. At the conference resolutions were passed condemning the proposed scheme of retrenchment as unnecessary and unjust and deciding to prepare for direct action if the scheme was put in operation.

Towards the end of March the full plan of retrenchment was staring the workers in the face. On 17 April the agent of the SIR issued a circular intimating that 3171 workers were going to be retrenched in the Goldenrock workshop and called for voluntary resignations, offering 1/12th of month's pay for every one month of service by way of bonus to those who would come forward to resign. But no one came forward to resign.

The railway workers launched a campaign to explain to the public as to why they were resorting to direct action to win their sympathies. They rejected the trade tests formula and sub-

mitting to medical examination. The agent threatened them with dismissal. He tried to drive a wedge between linesmen and workshopmen. With this object he made some vague promises of further concessions to the linesmen.

But the workers understood the game. Workers in the engineering workshop, after a huge demonstration in Trichinopoly, held a meeting where they unanimously declared that unless retrenchment orders were withdrawn and trade tests were abolished, there would be a general strike on the whole line from 14 July 1928. The ultimatum was sent to the agent of the SIR.

A strike committee consisting of Singaravelu, Mukundlal Sircar and other prominent leaders with Narayan Swami as secretary was set up. The SIR labour board gave them Rs 10,000 for propaganda to prepare for the general strike.

Then the workers directed their attention to the other railway lines in India. To fight on one line was not enough because the government would be able to recruit blacklegs from other lines. They decided to forge a united front of all-India railwaymen and give a final battle on the issue of retrenchment which had become a common danger facing all railwaymen.

Comrades therefore went to Bombay in the first week of July 1928 to meet the representatives of the GIP and BB & CI railwaymen's unions and come to an understanding with them. The meeting decided to requisition a special meeting of the general council of the All India Railwaymen's Federation. Singaravelu and Sircar were deputed to prevail upon the SIR men to postpone their action until 20 July meeting of the AIRF general council.

The leaders went to Nagpur and Kharagpur. The response was very encouraging. The BNR men readily agreed to support the common action. But at Calcutta, the EIR men were unwilling for immediate action because they had suffered a terrible defeat only a few months earlier. K. C. Mitra opposed the proposal and even disfavoured the idea of calling the meeting of the general council of the AIRF. But he was prevailed upon by Singaravelu, Sircar and Giri to call an urgent meeting of the general council on 18 July in Trichinopoly by sending telegraphic notices.

But the government held up these wires and thus sabotaged the meeting fixed for 18 July. The SJR men, as per their earlier plan, went on strike. The plan for concerted action could not materialise. The leaders met at Trichinopoly, found the reality of the situation and postponed the general council meeting to 5 August 1928.

There were agents of the railway agent in the trade-union movement who began to disrupt the work of the strike committee. Two leaders Shiva Rao and Kirk were against the strike. They carried on propaganda saying that the strike was 'initiated and wire-pulled by the agents of Moscow'. They carried on intrigues with the agent, persuaded him to lift the lock-out promising that they would prevail upon railwaymen under their influence to resume duty. The agent fell for their proposal and issued a notice on 2 July saying that workshops at Podanur Nagapattinam and Trichinopoly would be opened and those who did not want to offer satyagraha could join the workshops.

But this cunning tactic of the agent did not work. On 6 July complete hartal was observed in Trichinopoly. All business was suspended. Vegetable and grain markets remained closed in sympathy with the locked-out workers and a 3000 strong workers' procession marched through the town. The agent offered eleventh hour concessions, too, but railwaymen rallied to the general strike from the midnight of 19 July 1928. The entire Indian staff on the metre-gauge line was cent per cent on strike and the broad-gauge line also was considerably affected.

The strike lasted for ten days only. But it raged in all its fury for those ten days. The epic struggle beggars description. Working of the railways was disrupted; workshops were empty; trains were held up; there was satyagraha on the lines and there were arrests; all methods were used to hold up trains; they mounted the engines, removed the fire; rails were removed and so on. It was a most militant struggle and was a challenge to governmental authority and its law and order.

The government moved its state machinery in full force and fury. All meetings were banned; police and military called in to confront the strikers; there was agalore of bayonet charges and firings, ruthless repression; leaders were arrested and put

behind bars; none of the leaders was left outside to guide the strike.

It was a field day for the traitors—Shiva Rao and Kirk. Anglo-Indian members of the railway workers betrayed the strike from the very beginning. Their anti-strike propaganda went on condemning the strike and strike leaders, thus strengthening the hands of the authorities. All kinds of terrorisation was used to break the strike. Orders were issued to the district magistrates to use emergency powers to break the strike.

Repression on the one hand and throwing some sop on the other; arbitration on the issue of increasing the wages of the menials, redressal of all running staff's grievances, payment of wages for the lock-out period and absorption of surplus men after voluntary resignation etc.—all this confused the workers who were at a loss and did not know what to do, while the call for surrender was being dinned into their ears from all sides.

With the arrest of Narayana Swami, the secretary of the strike committee, the strike practically collapsed. On 29 July 1928 the SIR Union called off the strike and railwaymen began trekking back to work. The strike leaders were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment ranging from six months to ten years.

This strike of the SIR workers occupies a prominent place in the history of the working-class movement in India.

## 22. Lillooah Workshop Strike

Workers of the railway workshop of the East Indian Railway Co at Lillooah near Calcutta had been petitioning to the agent for recognition of their union and redressal of their grievances. The agent did not pay any heed to their requests. But instead he dismissed two of the union's most active members. On 3 March four more workers were summarily discharged. When protests were made against this high-handed action, the agent promised to reinstate the dismissed workers but not two who had been earlier discharged. This exhausted the patience of the workers.

Workers of the railway workshop decided to retaliate through a stay-in strike. On 8 March the agent closed the works by an order of the company and 14,000 men were locked out. Despite this provocative behaviour of the company the workers remained quiet but firm. However the company was out to play its mischievous game to cow down the workers.

The workers' demands were: an allround rise of 25 per cent in wages; wages up to the level of Lucknow and Lahore workshops; not less than Rs 45 a month for a worker; free quarters for workers or allowance for accommodation, etc.

On 28 March after a peaceful demonstration the workers were returning from Bamangachi where a meeting had been held. The police suddenly swooped on them and began to baton charge them. The military came rushing to the aid of the police and assaulted the workers. Two strikers were shot down and a number of them were injured. Later captain Christie, the officer responsible for this, was censured by the district magistrate after an official inquiry. According to the inquiry no warning had been given to the strikers to disperse and the shots appeared to have been fired not at random but deliberately aimed at known leaders of the movement. More significant was the fact that the workers killed and injured were shot in the back. This supported the workers' contention that they were returning peacefully and there was no confrontation with the police. On the contrary they were driven back by the police and the troops.

The clash infuriated the workers and intensified the class character of the struggle. Most of the other departments of the railway began to support the struggle and some centres of the East Indian Railway at Howrah and Kharagpur came out in sympathetic action in their support.

Various other strikes in mills were on in different parts of the country. The strike of the workers of Elgin Mills at Kanpur ended in a victory. The workers went back to work under old conditions and got the forfeited wages.

Scavengers of Calcutta went on strike after a lot of petition for a living wage. The Swaraj Party was controlling the Calcutta Municipality. Instead of paying some relief to the workers they brought in the police force and blacklegs to break the strike. This opened the eyes of the workers and helped them to shed

their illusions as to which side of the barricade the Swaraj Party stood.

In the second strike, 13,000 strong scavengers' union gave an ultimatum to the committee declaring their preparedness for a strike if the terms of settlement of earlier strike of February 1928 were not implemented within a stipulated time. The union passed a resolution condemning the Swaraj Party for its strike-breaking tactics. The strikers were so furious with the Swaraj Party that when an emissary of the party went to meet them, they assaulted him. There was nothing to choose between the British employers and Indian employers so far as exploitation was concerned.

## 23. Tata Iron and Steel Works

The problem of retrenchment and lock-out faced the workers everywhere. Jamshedpur Tata Iron and Steel Works were no exception. Workers put forward some elementary demands before the management. The latter replied by locking out 90 per cent of the workers and discharging a large number of them under the plea of reduction of the staff. This was in complete violation of the declared policy of the company.

The management announced the terms on which the works would be reopened. It included a reduction in the staff by a quarter, renewal of the bonus scheme, wage claims to be considered after work is resumed, company should not be compelled to pay wages for periods when the factory was closed for whatever reason.

Workers reiterated their demand for a direct increase in wages instead of the bonus scheme. They insisted that all staff dismissed as a result of the policy of reduction be taken back and that policy be stopped; and all workers dismissed be reinstated in their old jobs without a break in service or victimisation. The striking workers further reminded the employers of their promise of Indianisation which had not been fulfilled by



them as yet because the company was still employing foreign workers to fill up vacancies.

The management created a problem on the question as to whom they should talk to settle the strike. They would not talk to Homi because he had a personal grudge against the company. The Labour Association also did not accept him as their representative because he had tendered evidence before the tariff board advocating a drastic reduction in the staff. But the fact was that the company had no will to find a way out.

The general secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress appealed to the political department of the Bihar and Orissa governments to intervene in the dispute as the company was receiving money from the central government and offer its good offices to settle the dispute. The matter rested there for the time being

## 24. Bauria Jute Mi

A British company called the Fort Glouster Ltd owned three jute mills in Bauria near Howrah employing 15,000 workers and reaping huge profits. Conditions of work and living of the jute workers were very bad. They were being paid between Rs 13 and 15 per head per month. The rates were lower than those in two other factories in the same locality owned by some other owners. Workers' grievances were multiplying and their lives had become very hard.

At the call of the provincial committee of the AITUC, workers decided to organise the Bauria Jute Workers' Union on 15 July 1925. As soon as the union was formed, the management of the mills dismissed out of hand five activists of the union. The unionmen went to the company to plead for their reinstatement. Watchmen prevented them from meeting the management. A scuffle took place and the workers were welcomed with bullets. Twentyfour workers were injured and disabled. Indiscri-

minate arrests began to be made. In protest the workers ceased work demanding reinstatement of those dismissed. The company declared a lock-out.

The company wanted to teach the workers a lesson for organising the union. It brought forward charges against the workers for 'rioting and theft' and the government launched prosecutions against them in the courts for which the expenses were borne by the management. The British jute company and the British government were hand-in-glove against the workers. Many workers got their bails cancelled and went to jail because they could not even bear the expenses of going from Bauria to Howrah for the trial.

Unity of the workers was very strong and praiseworthy. They went on fighting for six months to assert their right of association and also their right to live like human beings. They were fighting against tremendous odds with their backs to the wall. Their families were starving. They had to spend a lot of money to defend their cases in the court. Very meagre help came from outside. The All India Trade Union Congress sent in all Rs 600. Rupees three hundred and twentynine were sent by the jute and flax workers of Dundee. Appeal for funds made by Jawaharlal Nehru fell on deaf ears.

Jawaharlal Nehru appreciated the 'amazing courage' and steadfastness of the workers. He said "For companions the worker has hunger and semi-nudity and stark want; but the lords of jute have wealth in abundance and their allies are the government, the police officer and even the law courts. The scales are heavily weighed, but still with amazing endurance the workers have been carrying on the fight. Fifteen thousand of them have carried on the struggle for six months or more. During this period they have had to face firing, arrests and lengthy trials in courts of law which are still proceeding."

Appealing to the public and "awakened youth", Nehru said, "Are they prepared to see the arrogant lords of jute aided by all the power of the government crush the poor workers of Bauria and set this example to all the jute workers of Bengal? For the struggle is not a local one merely but one which affects the whole jute area and the trade-union movement in India."

Up to 24 January 1929 no money reached the All India Trade Union Congress. Then Nehru wrote to Subhash Bose to help the workers if possible.

## 25. Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case

We have described the political and economic struggles that took place in India against British rule for freedom and the struggles of the working class against exploitation by the capitalists—British or Indian, up to 20 March 1929. We have seen that since the Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case, the British policy of repression and suppression in this period could not halt, retard or check the growing radical movement against the enslavers. Under the impact of the Russian revolution, Marxist-Leninist ideas were continuously spreading in the country; political and class consciousness was steadily growing in the working class and sections of the intelligentsia a proof of which lay in the furious struggles fought by the workers in the textile mills, in the railway workshops and on the railway lines, in the jute mills, etc., against retrenchment, dismissal and increase in workload, for winning better wages, recognition of the right to form their unions and the right of living a human life.

To sum up: the British ruling class was terrifically alarmed, at the rapid growth of communist influence in the industrial workers; at the rising curve of struggles in the British and Indian owned industries by the workers under the influence of the communists; at the growth of trade-union movement and the steady increase of communist influence in it, resulting in continuous fall in the influence of the right reformist procapitalist trade union leadership; at the growing organisation and role of the communist-dominated workers' and peasants' parties and youth leagues; at the role the communists and the working class played in exposing and running down the Simon Commission for its anti-democratic character and its anti-selfdetermination mandate; at its fight against the anti-communist Public Safety

Bill, the anti-labour Trade Disputes Bill and the Whitley Commission designed to shackle the working class still further; at the visit of Saklatvala who undauntedly preached communism in India and helped in strengthening the movement; at members of the CPGB—Ben F. Bradley, Philip Spratt and later Lester Hutchinson coming to India, staying with known communists and helping the building of the communist and trade-union movement; at the class conscious working class becoming an independent political force and a factor in radicalising the national freedom movement; at the links being established between the political force of the class conscious working class and the national freedom movement; at the impact of the national liberationist struggles being waged by the Chinese people and Indian people's support to it against the British imperialists; at the establishment of relations with the League Against Imperialism at Brussels and aid given to the striking workers by the Workers' Welfare League, London, the Soviet trade unions and the Red International Labour Unions; and at the decline of the influence of the British Labour Party as a pro-imperialist which stood against the interests of the Indian working class and India's freedom.

In order to fully understand the political and economic significance of the above appraisal, two things must be properly borne in mind:

*One*, the emergence of the first socialist state in the world was a warning signal sounding the death-knell of the colonial system and heralding an upsurge in the national-liberation movements. It was the beginning of the end of the capitalist-imperialist system. British imperialists considered and wrote it in their reports that the Soviet state was their deadliest enemy. Overthrow of the tsar's vast colonial empire showed to the colonial peoples that imperialism was not invincible and the British imperialists were afraid of a similar revolution being repeated in India—the biggest colony of the British empire.

Further the example set by the Russian revolution by setting free the colonies in the tsar's empire and calling upon the people to exercise their right of selfdetermination, abolition of landlordism and taking over of industries were great rousing revolutionary factors for the people of the colonies to fight fear-

lessly for their freedom. The growing influence and impact of the Russian revolution was worrying and frightening the British imperialists out of their wits, impelling them to find ways to throttle the communists and the mass movements started and dominated by them.

*Two*, in January 1928-33, the worldwide overproduction crisis came with a bang in the conditions of the general crisis of capitalism. The crisis enveloped the entire capitalist world, shaking its system of world economic relations. The imperialists began shifting the burdens of the crisis on to the dependent and colonial countries resulting in intensification of the exploitation of the people.

In India, the impact of the world overproduction crisis was intensified by its own agrarian crisis resulting in still further deterioration of its economy affecting greatly their livelihood and causing impoverishment of the mass of the peasantry. The workers, peasants and the rural poor had no alternative but either to submit and die a slow agonising death through hunger or disease or to fight back and face bullets. The working people generally speaking choose the latter path.

This was the political and economic background which led the British rulers of India to strike at the growing communist movement and arrest communist, trade union and peasant leaders in the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case on 20 March 1929. Now we shall proceed briefly to evaluate what happened in this long-drawn-out case lasting four years and a half.

The communist movement had become a great headache to the British Indian government. There is a lot of correspondence between the provincial governors and the viceroy on the one hand and the viceroy and the secretary of state for India on this matter on the other. They were worried as to how to lay to rest this ghost. All kinds of suggestions were being made for curbing the communist movement. There was also the threat of a general strike on the railways in the air.

F. Isenberger on 29 August 1928 wrote, "The feasibility of a general prosecution for conspiracy might be examined provided that trial on such a charge was not held in Bengal for success would be improbable." The Punjab government's view was

that "power might be taken to direct by executive order that a communist should not leave the limits of his own province or district and should not make any speech at any public meeting..."

"14. The most important of these suggestions relate to the control of the press... reintroduce some measure of control over the press... the present law affords no effective means of checking sedition and revolutionary propaganda in the press."

The summing up was, "16. Bombay and the Punjab attach special importance to the development of propaganda by government to make clear the public the real aims of the communists and to enlist the support of the classes whom the communists' program threatens. UP and Bengal attach special importance to cutting of supplies of money that may reach the communists from outside."

In taking action against the communists, the government wanted to do it in such a way as to keep the extreme nationalists and the communists divided. The government cautioned, "communism contains grave dangers for the very classes who support the extreme national movement and our aim should be to do nothing which will produce an artificial union between the two movements..."

The Bombay Chamber of Commerce and the Bombay Indian Merchants Association were asking the government of India "to introduce immediately an emergency ordinance to deal with the strike leaders... the agitators were mainly communists."<sup>13</sup>

### *The Secret Files' Revelations*

The British Indian government was contemplating the launching of the Meerut Conspiracy Case for very long. The viceroy of India had communicated to the secretary of state for India in this regard several times. On 25 September 1928, he had sent a telegram to the secretary of state, in which he said, "We might be able to proceed against Bradley and Spratt in a general conspiracy case, prospects of which are now under investigation."

---

13. Above quotations are from G. No. 18/XVI/1928, Home-Political and K. W.

H. G. Haig on 3 October 1928 wrote that his excellency was considering "the institution of a conspiracy case against communists in India... it will include Spratt and Bradley. Such a case can be built around the activities of Spratt."

"The (Public Safety) Bill to have power to intercept remittance from abroad." I(rwin) 6-10-28.

*"It would be easy to point to the great harm done by Spratt and Bradley before the law was able to touch them and to the necessity for arming ourselves with power to stop such activities at the very outset."* (viceroy to S/S dated 13 November, 1928).

Earlier Mr Horton and D. Petrie had recommended to the government of India, *"Put it forthwith into a court with every hope of securing conviction"* (15 January 1929). Material shown to Langford James, practically convinced him that there will be a good case. But *"We could not, however, take the chance of submitting the case to a jury. However good the case, there could be no assurance that a jury would convict and we cannot put the case into court unless we are convinced that it will result in conviction (emphasis added).*

"3. The two principal centres of the activities of conspiracy have been Bombay and Calcutta. In both these places the case would be tried by the High court with a jury and neither Mr Langford James nor the home department are prepared to recommend this."

"4. It is proposed, therefore, that the case should be tried at Meerut.. good reasons, quite apart from the point about a jury, for such a decision."

Reasons given were—(1) *Clearly undesirable to have the trial at either Bombay or Calcutta due to the "present dangerous atmosphere prevailing among the labouring population."* (2) A branch of the Workers' and Peasants' Party at Meerut... place visited by Spratt and other important members (Muzaffar Ahmad, Sohan Singh Josh, Abdul Majid and Sehgal) of the conspiracy. (3) It is a convenient central place for a trial. (4) Also conveniently situated for the government of India "who are really primarily responsible for the trial." (5) *"It is probable that objections will be raised on behalf of Spratt and Bradley*

*that by having a trial at Meerut we are depriving them of the privilege of being tried by a jury which they would enjoy at Calcutta and Bombay."*

The document further asserted that "If it is decided to institute the case, government should remain quite firm about its being tried at Meerut and should not under any circumstances agree to its transfer to Bombay or Calcutta with a view to trial being held with a jury."

Horton and Petrie raised the point of firmness with the government of India because they foresaw agitation being "got up in England on the ground that Englishmen are being deprived of the privilege of trial by jury."

"Viceroy directed that these proposals be circulated to all Hon'ble Members—20-2-29. All members agreed on 21-2-19."<sup>14</sup>

The government of India even got it verified from the governor of UP whether cases under Chapter VI IPC were triable by jury or not in the province. The governor wrote to Haig "Not triable by jury.—27-2-1929."

The government did not remain content with only this. Home political department wrote to the prosecuting counsel Langford James to know when the case would open and said,

"2 (a) A judicial pronouncement is required as early as possible which will enable us to deal with further manifestation of communism and to prevent the communist movement recovering from the blow which the arrest of the leaders has dealt. We hope to be able on the result of the case to make further communist activities both difficult and dangerous for those who wish to indulge in them... wanted clear pronouncement from the court these activities are illegal" (emphasis added).

"(b) From the political point of view, it would be in advantage to be able to convince the public in general as early as possible that communism is not the kind of movement that should receive the sympathy of nationalists. The opposition to the Public Safety Bill has created an artificial and fake atmosphere and we want to set that right as soon as possible" (emphasis added).

14. File No. 10/IV/29, Home-Political.



*"Government will not agree to a transfer."* (of the case to some other place). (29 April, 1929).

This document gives away the mind and strategy of the government of India on the inception of the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case. It laid down how the 'conspirators' were to be tried and where. It did no mince matters. It said that the government was predetermined to convict the accused and the force of the trial was only to hoodwink the public. It also meant what sort of legal defence facilities the accused in the case were to be given.

This document is very important and it should be taken note of because the points it raised in it were going to be raised again by the defence in the course of the case and the courts were to decide on those points in favour of the government even if the law went against them. The truth was that under the British regime, the executive was all-powerful, the courts and the Central Legislative Assembly were subordinate to it.

### *People Arrested*

On 20 March 1929 there were police raids in four provinces of India—Bombay, Bengal, UP and the Punjab to arrest the communists, prominent members of the workers' and peasants' parties and leftwing trade union and peasant leaders. The raiding parties, it seems, were instructed to thoroughly search all the places having any connection with them and take possession of all papers—printed or hand-written, correspondence files, newspapers, pamphlets and books which they could find in their offices or homes. Thus several cartloads of material was brought to Meerut district jail along with the arrested men for the prosecution to sort out, study and utilise it in the conspiracy case.

Thirtyone alleged 'conspirators' were arrested on 20 March. Lester Hutchinson was arrested later and brought to the jail, making a total of 32. But there were more who were wanted in the case who were not yet arrested; and there were others "not resident in India but amenable to Indian law". Most of the latter category belonged to the CPGB. They were—R. Page Arnot, R. P. Dutt, S. Saklatvala, Harry Pollitt, George Allison alias D. Campbell, N. J. Upadhyaya, Graham Pollard. "The

above list is by no means final or exhaustive." R. A. Horton, (15 January 1929) M. N. Roy and others were added later.

The first category consisted of Amir Haider Khan, Abdul Halim, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Pendse and Kulkarni. Their activities are given in the government report.<sup>15</sup> These comrades were later not proceeded against.

The men against whom the conspiracy case was launched were—

1. *West Bengal*: Philip Spratt, Muzaffar Ahmad, Dharani Goswami, Gopen Chakravarti, Gopal Basak, Radha Raman Mitra, Shibnath Banerji, Shamsul Huda, Kishorilal Ghose.

2. *Maharashtra*: B. F. Bradley, S. V. Ghate, S. S. Mirajkar, K. N. Joglekar, R. S. Nimbkar, S. A. Dange, A. A. Alwe, G. R. Kasle, D. Thengdi, M. G. Desai, G. Adhikari and S. H. Jhabvala and later L. Hutchinson.

3. *UP*: P. C. Joshi, Ajodhya Prasad, Gauri Shanker, Bishwanath Mukherji, Dharambir Singh, L. Kadam and Shaukat Usmani.

4. *Punjab*: Abdul Majid, Sohan Singh Josh, Kedarnath Sehgal.

These people were prominent leaders of the workingclass, peasants and youth. S. A. Dange was the general secretary of the Gimi Kamgar Union, the revolutionary union of Bombay's textile workers and was assistant secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress and a leading member of the Workers' and Peasants' Party of Bombay. S. S. Mirajkar was secretary of the Workers' and Peasants' Party of Bombay and secretary of the British Steam Navigation Co Union. Muzaffar Ahmad was secretary of the Workers' and Peasants' Party of Bengal and editor of *Ganavani* its organ and vice-president of the Calcutta Scavengers' Union, etc. Dharani Goswami and Gopendra Chakravarti were both leaders of the Youth League in Bengal and active peasant organisers. Dr G. Adhikari, who after securing his doctorate in Germany had come to India and stayed only 100 days wrote articles for the *Spark* edited by M. G. Desai, a young journalist holding socialist views. Joglekar and Nimb-

---

15. File No. 10/II/29 Home-Political, National Archives of India.

kar were members of the All-India Congress Committee and also of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, etc.

Three Englishmen sent by the CPGB had played a big part in building the trade union and workers' and peasants' movement in India and they occupied prominent positions in these organisations. Bradley was a member of the executive council of the GIP Railwaymen's Union and the Girmi Kamgar Union. Philip Spratt likewise held prominent positions in the trade unions in Calcutta and he wrote a booklet *India and China* for which he and Mirajkar were arrested but the jury had released them. Hutchinson had taken up the work after the Meerut arrests and begun to edit the new *Spark* when he was arrested and brought to Meerut.

The arrest of these three Englishmen along with the Indians showed that all Englishmen were not enslavers of India, that there were others, specially communists among the Englishmen who were fighting their own colonialists for India's freedom.

Sohan Singh Josh from the Punjab was the president of the first All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party Conference, general secretary of the Workers' and Peasants' Party in Punjab and president of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. Abdul Majid was organiser of the Press Workers' Union and other unions. He was Moscow-returned, had been tried in the Peshawar Conspiracy Case and sentenced. Shaukat Usmani of the Peshawar Conspiracy Case fame was also a Moscow-returned Hijrati who wrote the booklet *Moscow to Peshawar*.

P. C. Joshi, was a student of law at the Allahabad University, secretary of the UP Workers' and Peasants' Party, member of the executive of the All India Workers' and Peasants' Party, editor of the *Krantikari*. S. H. Jhabvala, 'father of fifty trade unions' in Bombay. D. R. Thengdi, an old man of 65 with a fighting spirit, a former president of the AITUC and secretary of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, Bombay. Kishorilal Ghose, a lawyer and journalist from Calcutta, Kedarnath Sehgal, former president of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. Shibnath Banerji was a trade unionist. Others were working among the peasants and workers.

The immediate object in arresting these people was to "break up the existing organs and remove the more dangerous leaders."

In the government's view this would strike a blow "against the indigenous communist movement from which it is likely to take some time to recover." "This combined with the exclusion of foreign communists would give us a valuable breathing space." (H. G. Haig, 31 August 1928).

Here the admission of the British government is noteworthy. The government knew that it could not wipe out the communist movement which had come to stay. It could only weaken it for some time to time. These arrests plus the exclusion of the British or international communists' held from outside would give the government 'a valuable breathing space'.

It was truly an international gathering of Englishmen, hindus, muslims and a sprinkling of other communities, all well-known leaders in their own right.

But there was more to it than the political evaluation given above. The conspiracy case was firstly going to be a weapon to start a hair-raising smear campaign against the communists in order to frighten the people to beware of them and to mobilise the propertied classes behind the government. The government had decided to conduct horror-striking propaganda against the communists for isolating them. Secondly, the conspiracy case was a pawn in the political game of the conservative British leaders for the elections to the British parliament.

### *British Labour Imperialism*

It was Baldwin's Conservative government which sanctioned the launching of the Meerut Conspiracy Case with a view to taking advantage of the impending parliamentary elections. Conservative colonially exploiting Britain was very allergic to communism. The forgery of so-called Zinoviev letter paid it earlier rich dividends in the elections. General elections to the parliament were held in May 1929. But the Baldwin government suffered a defeat in the elections and the British Labour Party came to power on 8 June 1929 and MacDonald became the prime minister. Public opinion was strongly in favour of withdrawing the Meerut Conspiracy Case but the MacDonald government refused to do that.

On 12 June 1929 the accused in the Meerut case asked the judge Milner White to permit them to send a telegram to prime

minister MacDonald requesting him for restoration of the unlawfully abrogated rights of the defendants and for referring the trial to a jury court in Britain. The telegram was as follows:

“Now that British Labour has returned to power, will Indian labour be restored to its rights? Will the anti-labour legislation be repealed and will the Meerut case in view of its significance for the Indian and international movement be withdrawn from the backward part of the country and referred for trial by jury in the mother country?”

The telegram was neither acknowledged nor replied to. The British Labour Party government of MacDonald was following the same imperialist policy as the previous Conservative government. It was a Labour government in name only and continued the imperialist practices. MacDonald, when he was prime minister of the first Labour government, had bluntly said in 1924, “No party in Great Britain will be cowed down by threats of force or by policies designed to bring government to a standstill, if any section in India are under delusion that that is not so, events will very sadly disappoint them. Come nearer to us rather than stand aside from us to get at our reason and goodwill.”<sup>16</sup>

And in a speech at a public meeting in 1929, MacDonald said: “Let us come to power. I will cut short the criminal work of this organisation (the Communist International) not only in India, but in the whole colonial East.”<sup>17</sup>

He pursued exactly the same line that the British bourgeoisie pursued unashamedly. There was no distinction between the two policies—conservative or labourite.

Petitions for referring the Meerut cases for trial by jury were filed again and again. Appeals to this effect were sent to the judicial council of the viceroy of India, to the India office as well as to the judicial authorities directly concerned with the trial. Objections were also raised to the effect that a case of

16. *Inprecor*, p 119, 1924.

17. *Communist*, No 3, July-August 1950.

a national communist conspiracy was not within the competence of the Meerut magistrate's court and later the sessions court.<sup>17a</sup> Even Sections 275 and 443 of the IPC referring the Meerut case for trial by jury did not come to their help. The fate of the Meerut prisoners was left entirely in the hands of the conservative viceroy lord Irwin who had already decided that neither transfer nor trial by jury could and would be allowed.

That was the policy of imperialism under MacDonald's Labour government. No release, no transfer of the case and no trial by jury. Lord Irwin was left to deal with the fate of the Meerut case prisoners who lodged in the Meerut jail were shut in separate cells and not allowed to see each other's face, let alone talking to each other. They were treated worse than criminals. Their turbans and towels were taken away from them forcibly and kept outside the cells so that the prisoners might not hang themselves! No books were allowed to them inside the cells. The warders were running about to see that nobody talked to the occupant of his next cell. An atmosphere of terror—which the jail was—was further intensified to terrorise the inmates. And they were kept in that miserable atmosphere and condition for weeks on and until agitation both inside and outside compelled the jail-cum-government authorities to take them out of the separate cells and put them in a big barrack.

Meanwhile Horton and his gang, Khairat Nabi, Tasadduk Hussain and their office paraphernalia and the prosecuting counsel Langford James, young Bengali barrister Mitter were busy neck deep going through several cartloads of material in order to decide what to put and what not to put before the trying magistrate, Mr Milner White. The government wanted to open the case as early as possible. Lot of correspondence took place between the government and the prosecuting counsel on this point. The latter was asking for more time again and again. Ultimately the government threw up its hands and decided: He must be allowed to run the case in his own way. (Haig, 4 May, 1929).

17a. The Bengali, 7 May 1929.

*Special Magistrate's Court*

It was the same old story again. The charge that had been brought up in the Peshawar and Kanpur Bolshevik conspiracy cases against the communists accused was repeated this time on a bigger scale and with greater propaganda show in the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case.

The case was actually opened after about three months on 12 June 1929 by Mr Langford James before Mr Milner White, special magistrate of Meerut. This prosecuting counsel was president of the European Association in Calcutta and was the bitterest enemy of Indian freedom and communism. In the beginning of December 1926, at a banquet in Calcutta in honour of lord Irwin, the viceroy, he said that for reasons of "moral nature" the continuance of British rule in India was "necessary for the good of the Indians themselves".

This was the same notorious European Association which tried to make general Dwyer, the perpetrator of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of the innocents, a hero and presented a big purse to him to honour him. But the ire of the Indians made the government retreat and call him back in sack cloth and ashes.

He was the most highly paid counsel of his time. According to Muzaffar Ahmad, Langford James was getting "a fee of eighty guineas per day and his junior J. P. Mitter was paid a fee of five guineas a day for the entire period of the trial. In those days the guinea had the constant value of Rs 17 and the government paid such big fees whether the court was in session or not and irrespective of holidays. It was estimated that the government used to pay a sum of Rs 34,000 per month to Mr James alone.<sup>18</sup>

Some time after the Meerut case accused persons' arrest and their lodgement in the Meerut district jail several national leaders came to see them. Most important among them were Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Motilal Nehru, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Fari-dul Haq Ansari and Delhi's national leaders. B. T. Ranadive came to help us sometime later in defence matters but he was

18. *Ibid*, p 3.

also arrested. The national leaders assured the accused that they would do something for their defence.

On the opening day of the trial, the trying magistrate, several national advocates, lawyers, barristers came to the court from different parts of the country besides the local ones. They had all come on their own.

So the defence arrangements of the Meerut prisoners were in doldrums. A defence committee had been set up in England on the initiative of the CPGB. Some help was coming from there now and then. Some collections were made by the Indian working people. But the defence was always short of funds and was living from hand to mouth. There were many occasions when they did not have even a morsel in hand to be put in the mouth. If the trial had taken place in Calcutta or Bombay, the working class would have come to their aid and contributed every month to keep the defence pot boiling. But the almighty government ordained that the case would not be held there and further passed two more anti-labour laws forbidding any money for defence or help from international sources.

Surprisingly, Congress leaders advised the Meerut prisoners to plead guilty to the charges. The accused rejected this advice out of hand. Their plea was that the case would soon come to an end and the defence funds would no longer be necessary. To plead guilty meant to abandon communism and blacken their faces before the working class and the Indian people at large. The communists had their own plans to fight their case.

Lester Hutchinson's mother Mrs Knight was doing lot of work in England for the release of the Meerut prisoners, and securing facilities for them. She was approaching members of parliament, supplying them with material for putting questions in the parliament about the Meerut undertrials. On 23 October 1930 she complained to British authorities that 'her son was not treated properly'. She was not getting any letter from him. She sent to him two parcels, one containing a copy of Upton Sinclair's *Mountain City* and the other a novel by H. G. Wells, but they were not delivered to him, etc.<sup>19</sup>

19. File 120/1931, Home-Political.



Miss Lee, MP put questions in this regard on 10 November and again questions were put in the House of Commons on December 1930. The British government had to provide answers supplied by Khairat Nabi of the Indian intelligence branch on the floor of the house. The answer said: 'It is in the nature of the accused and their relations to take up one point or another... for their own propaganda purposes in England... Sometimes slight delays in posting their letters... not withheld, but certain portions of one scored out.'"<sup>20</sup>

Mrs Knight approached even a high official in the office of the secretary of state for India who threw up his hands saying he could not get her son's release. Besides the *Daily Worker*, organ of the CPGB, was carrying on propaganda, exposing the bad conditions in which the Meerut prisoners were kept inside the jail. At one time papers were thrown from the parliamentary gallery demanding release of the Meerut case prisoners.

Langford James' opening speech before the trying magistrate took ten days to finish. It was downright amusing and entertaining. It drew adverse comments from national leaders. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Walter Citrine, general secretary British Trade Union Congress in early 1929 "... The counsel for the prosecution held forth as if he was addressing a Hyde Park meeting and the government of India sent down their head publicity officer from Simla to Meerut simply to organise propaganda."<sup>21</sup>

It is a fact that government files show that it did send its publicity officer to organise propaganda against communism, the Third International and the Red International Trade Unions (RILU), etc. And the prosecuting counsel was by conviction fully at one with the government to damn communism, the communist party, the international communist organisations and to show to the world that they were in fact fighting against communism in India to defend the world capitalist system. So James' vehemence is quite understandable.

Intelligence files show that the government was very keen that the communists should be isolated from the nationalists in

20. *Ibid.*

21. *The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Its Records*: L. Dewan, p 4.

India. It wanted to convince the public that "communism is not the kind of movement that should perceive sympathy of nationalists". The opposition to the Public Safety Bill by the nationalists in the Central Assembly had created the congress-communist get together atmosphere which the authorities wanted to disrupt. Horton and the government publicity agent were at great pains to show that this was a Moscow intrigue and had nothing to do with nationalism." That was why Langford James harangued in the magistrate's court: "communists are anti-national, anti-religion and anti-everything". He was carrying out the bidding of his masters. The policy of world capitalism-imperialism was to show up the communists as 'Moscow agents', as anti-religion, anti-marriage, anti-family and so on and create an atmosphere of contempt, ridicule and hatred against them and discredit them, isolate them from the nationalists and the general masses.

That explains as to why Jawaharlal Nehru was not implicated in this conspiracy case. He had written many letters to the secretariat of the League Against Imperialism at Brussels and received replies from them. He had himself taken part in the league conference and had been elected as one of the presidium members. He had persuaded the Indian National Congress to become its associate member and his sympathies were with the Third International rather than the Second International. He had visited the Soviet Union, which 'crime' had landed almost all men in jail in other cases. He was praising the progress made by Soviet Russia. Besides, he knew, according to him, more of communism than the Meerut accused. The only reason for not arresting him was the government's policy was directed towards isolating the communists from the mainstream of the national movement which has been described earlier.

From beginning to end, Langford James' address was nothing but propaganda for the government, against the communists, against the Soviet Union. According to the prosecution, the main criminals were the Russian government and the communist international. Langford James denounced Marx, Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries with equal zeal. He spared

no pains to 'expose' the ugly 'murderous' nature of communists from whose hands blood was dripping.

But all of this mostly fell on deaf ears because all government propaganda was suspect in the eyes of the Indian people. It would however be wrong to deny that this poisonous propaganda against communism and communists did not cut some ice among nationalists and ignorant people. Prejudices sown against the communists and communism from the early days still persist and refuse to die even in some sections of the rural and urban poor even today.

### *Committed to Sessions*

Mr Milner White, the trying magistrate, was a very tactful person. He did not want to displease the accused as far as possible. The implication of three British communists in the case was a factor in determining his attitude towards the prisoners. Because of his tactful handling of the case, few and far between exchanges took place between the magistrate and the accused. He successfully piloted the case and committed the accused to the sessions court on 11 January 1930 after about seven months.

Milner White did one good thing. He sanctioned that all the prohibited or proscribed literature be provided to the accused inside jail to help them prepare their case. All the pamphlets, books etc. which were not available to them outside were now made available inside jail. They had been listed, put in an almirah and kept under lock and key and the key was given to one of the communists. This satisfied their hunger for communist literature. And they studied the literature voraciously to equip themselves politically and theoretically for future work. So the period of trial became one which benefitted the communist accused tremendously.

"The one bright feature of our imprisonment was", wrote Hutchinson, "that there was no restriction on our reading. We had been allowed to form a small library of proscribed literature to enable us to prepare our defence, but which also served the more useful purpose of enabling us to increase our political and general knowledge. The library was under close

supervision in case any of the 'poison' should escape into the outside world and it was periodically inspected to see whether any books were missing. But it was of inestimable value not only to our defence but to our own educational development."<sup>22</sup>

On 11 January 1930, Mr Milner White, the magistrate framed the following charges against the 31 accused:

"That you in and between 1925-29 within and without British India agreed and conspired together with one another and with Amir Haider Khan, the absconding accused and persons and bodies mentioned in the list attached and other persons known and unknown and not before the court to deprive the king of the sovereignty of British India and thereby committed an offence punishable under Section 121-A, Indian Penal Code and within the cognisance of the court of sessions and I hereby direct that you should be tried by that court under the said charge."

The case was committed to the special sessions judge, R. L. Yorke on 14 January 1930. The magistrate let off only one accused named Dharambir Singh against whom we find very severe strictures made in the government reports. He wrote on 26 November 1929 a statement—rather an apology to the government—that he was not a communist. Then he wrote an amendment to that statement with regard to the Workers' and Peasants' Party. Langford James was not satisfied with his statement and dubbed him as 'extremely foolish'. He wanted from him "a statement disavowing any connection with communists and explaining his connection with the Workers' and Peasant's Party... He made a verbal statement (earlier of which approximately eighty per cent was not only untrue but a terrible petty-bourgeois vacillator. He cut a very sorry figure in the case. Apology and his reiteration that he was a Gandhian and that he believed in non-violence helped him to be let off."<sup>23</sup>

After the prosecution counsel concluded his arguments in the magistrate's court, the accused moved that they be allowed to go to the Allahabad High court to get the case transferred

22. *Conspiracy at Meerut*, Hutchinson, p 126.

23. File 10/IV/1929—Home-Political.

to some other province. The transfer application was moved on behalf of the accused by Pandit Motilal Nehru and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, two topmost lawyers of the time. The arguments were so reasonable and convincing that it was impossible to refute them. But what could reasonable and convincing arguments do when it had already been decided by the government beforehand, as we have shown earlier, that the venue of the case would remain at Meerut and no jury would be allowed even if the heavens fall. So the transfer application was rejected not because of Langford James' convincing refutation of the defence arguments but because the government had already decided so. Sir Edward Grimwood Mears discussed the application. It took three weeks' time to decide on the application.

Sessions judge R. L. Yorke was a sickly person. There was something wrong with his throat. He was coughing and spitting mucus in his handkerchief not a few times a day, dirtying half a dozen handkerchiefs. The strain was very much and it was the cause of irritation by our remarks, questions and interjections. The accused had made it not easy for him to carry on his work smoothly and peacefully. All happenings of a political nature in the country at that time were brought in the court and given expression to now by one prisoner, now another. His shouting notwithstanding, the prisoners put their points undaunted. His threats to charge them of contempt of court and punishment did not weigh much with the accused. The hungerstrike of the Lahore Conspiracy Case prisoners, Jatindra Nath's death, Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev's hanging—all these political issues were raised in the court and the British government was condemned for these heinous crimes despite threats from the sessions judge R. L. Yorke and his shouts of 'order,-order' and 'sit down'.

About this Hutchinson wrote,

"For three years he had toiled, tapping down the evidence on his little typewriter and his task had not been always easy. Hardly a day had passed throughout the three years without a 'breeze' with one or the other of the accused. His powers for contempt of court were too inadequate to be impressive... yet, although he must have realised that his powers were so

limited, he often seemed to go out of his way to provoke trouble unnecessarily by seeking to impose petty restrictions and by occasional outbursts of rudeness."

After the committal order it had become clear which of the accused stood where. Those who denied being communists formed a separate group. The communists consolidated themselves separately and began to function in a communist way, holding their meetings and deciding democratically on each problem as it arose on what attitude to take in regard to it in the court or inside the jail. There were some others who agreed with the communists but were not in the communist group. Dange was not in the communist group.

It was at this time that the communist group took a very important decision. It decided that the sessions court be utilised as a platform for communist propaganda. The government wanted to discredit and crush communism, the communist group would face this challenge boldly, stand by communism and propagate it without fear of the consequences. The group, it was decided, should not put up defence to find legal loopholes in the case, to save its skin but to challenge the very nature of the charge of communist conspiracy and the intention and purpose of the British rulers working behind it.

With this political objective in view, the communist group decided to conduct its own defence. Generally the lawyers derailed the clients by saying that a certain point would go against you, another point would strengthen the hands of the prosecution, concentrating only on legal quibbling. The group decided not to accept the advice of the lawyers in this matter. This line was accepted by the group as a whole enthusiastically and unreservedly.

Two tasks emerged from this line. *One*, any comrade who spoke in the court should always have in mind that resolution and should in no case deviate from it. *Two*, comrades should begin seriously studying the case and preparing statements to defend boldly their political revolutionary activities, refuting wrong and distorted facts and upholding the democratic right of freedom of speech, assembly and organisation, etc. They should fearlessly defend the Russian revolution, Marxism-

Leninism and the right to have international connections. All the above if it was legal in Britain; why was it illegal in India? They should stand four square for complete freedom for India and should denounce the Nehru Report and the draft constitution framed by it.

To sit in a case, week in and week out, month after month, for three years and a half was not a joke. One loses all interests if the same thing is repeated nauseum hundred and one times. As long as Langford James was alive (he died on 28 March 1930) and conducting the case, some entertainment was there. He was a crusader against communism, clever, quick-witted, possessed and sardonic humour and an inexhaustible fund of invectives. He fitted political oratory into legal verbosity very shrewdly. He was also keeping the court in good humour.

While he was alive, the accused used to pour fun on his gesticulation, flourishes and humour. They wrote skits on him in English, Bengali, Marathi, Hindi and Punjabi. Hutchinson wrote the following skit on him :

*Hail Langford James,  
Saviour of Britain's grace  
Whose fees are more handsome  
Than his face!*

Then came K.Mc J. Kemp to replace him as the chief government counsel. He was humourless dry as dust man, not vociferous like his predecessor. Mitter, the junior counsel, was in reality conducting the case after Langford James' death. Sometimes he fumbled for want of good arguments.

Most of the time in the court was spent by the prisoners in cutting jokes at each other, doing some cartoons and doodling facial expressions of somebody or the other which made one laugh. Dr Adhikari was adept in this art. Then sometimes a serious, another time a ludicrous caricature of somebody would be drawn and circulated among the accused and would be enjoyed by them. Some court titbits were written almost daily and circulated. These things were of transitory nature and torn off after reading. Had they been kept they would have amused even today. That was how the accused used to keep

away monotony and boredom and maintained them fit and in fighting spirit.

The case was looked after by Nimbkar, Joglekar and Muzaffar Ahmad on the communists' behalf. The communists engaged Mr Sheoprasad, a junior lawyer of Meerut, to represent them only in case any of them fell ill and was unable to attend the court so that the proceedings were not held up. Communists used to pay him a very small sum as fee for his services yet he remained with them till the end of the trial at the sessions court. Sheoprasad had developed an attachment to his clients because of his long association with them.

Shibnath Banerji and D. R. Thengli, both non-communists, engaged at government cost Mr Deokiprasanna Sinha at a fee of Rs 1500 per mensem. He was looking after the cases of other non-communists as well. The communists were approached by Mr Langford James on behalf of the government to have free legal aid, but they refused to avail themselves of it.

While going to the court, the accused used to sing many a revolutionary song and shout slogans. The slogans were "Inqulab Zindabad!", "Communist Party Zindabad!", "Soviet Russia Zindabad!", "Workers of the World Unite!", "Imperialism and Colonialism Murdabad!", "Freedom of India Zindabad!" Sohan Singh Josh had composed a few songs in Urdu in consonance with the English tunes of the red flag and other songs. They used to sing them daily. They also sang Bismil's *Sarfaroshi-ki tamanna ab hamare dil men hai, Dekhna hai zor kitna bazue-Qatil men hai*.

The case was the longest one in judicial history of India. It took three years and a half till the final appeal in the Allahabad High court which reduced imprisonment terms of the accused. Many skirmishes, bickerings, hot exchanges took place during this period making it lively. But most of the time it was boring and repetitive, sickening.

In order to understand the magnitude of the case, a few facts would suffice.

(1) The total number of prosecution exhibits came to 4859 pages. In the sessions court the prosecution evidence took over 13 months.



(2) Total number of defence exhibits—1406 pages. The defence evidence lasted for about two months.

(3) Speeches of the accused used by the prosecution came to 582 pages.

(4) Statements made by 281 prosecution witnesses before the sessions court—came to 900 pages.

(5) Statements made by the accused in the sessions court covered 3092 pages—printed in four volumes and occupied over ten months.

(6) Judgement delivered by the sessions judge was 676 pages in two volumes. He took over five months to write it.

(7) Committal orders passed by the additional district magistrate Meerut came to 287 pages.

(8) The arguments continued for over four months and a half... and so on. We have given only important items.

That was the gigantic scale on which the case was conducted.

The judgement of the sessions judge was not a balanced one. Our sharp and condemnatory criticism of British imperialism, its leaders in Britain and India, the imperialist law courts and their justice and last but not the least, our defiance of sessions judge Yorke's authority, had bitterly upset him. Some personal element therefore seems to have played its part in writing the judgement against the communist accused. In such conspiracy cases, judges always stood on the right side of the British government and acted on the hints or advice of the executive. For this they were rewarded with long holiday for rest and then given promotion.

Sessions judge Yorke took five months to write the judgement. He acquitted only three of the accused—Kishorilal Ghose and Shibnath Banerjee, both of Calcutta and Biswanath Mukherjee, a homeopath of Gorakhpur, UP. All the rest were given very heavy sentences.

- |                   |                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Muzaffar Ahmad | transportation for life      |
| 2. S. A. Dange    |                              |
| 3. Philip Spratt  |                              |
| 4. S. V. Ghate    | each to transportation for a |
| 5. K. N. Joglekar | period of 12 years           |
| 6. R. S. Nimbkar  |                              |

7. B. F. Bradley	
8. S. S. Mirajkar	each to transportation for a
9. Shaukat Usmani	period of 10 years
10. Mir Abdul Majid	
11. Sohan Singh Josh	each to transportation for a
12. Dharani Goswami	period of 7 years
13. Ajodhya Prasad	
14. G. Adhikari	each to transportation for a
15. P. C. Joshi	period of 5 years
16. M. G. Desai	
17. Gopendra Chakravarti	
18. H. L. Hutchinson	
19. Radha Raman Mitra	each to 4 years rigorous im-
20. Gopal Basak	prisonment
21. S. H. Jhabvala	
22. Kedarnath Sehgal	
23. Shamsul Huda	
24. A. A. Alwe	
25. G. R. Kasle	each to three years rigorous
26. Gauri Shanker	imprisonment
27. L. R. Kadam	

The sentences were not unexpected. The Meerut case prisoners were prepared for anything. This minion of law and order could not give more than transportation. There was howl raised against this judgement everywhere in the world. And the worst of it was that the judge put every one of the accused in C-class.

The appeal against the judgement was filed in the Allahabad High court and heard by chief justice Dr Suleiman and justice Douglas Young. They took only eight working days to deliver the judgement in a case which had taken four years and about six months in the magistrate's court and the sessions court. It is humanly impossible to wade through thousands of pages of prosecution exhibits, defence exhibits, speeches of the accused, statements made by 281 prosecution witnesses in the sessions court, 320 witnesses in the magistrate's court and three dozen defence witnesses in the sessions court, etc., etc.

That is not all. The statement of the accused alone consisted of 3092 pages and the sessions judge's judgement of 676 pages,

let alone the harangue of Mr Langford James before the magistrate's court and the committals order delivered by the magistrate running into 287 pages. It seems the High court judges heard the arguments of the prosecution as well as defence side, went through Mr Yorke's judgement and then delivered their judgement in just eight days. The shortest period taken for such a long case!

The High court judges released some of the accused and reduced the sentences in the rest of the cases as follows:

Those released were—(1) M. G. Desai, (2) H. L. Hutchinson, (3) H. S. Jhabvala, (4) Radha Raman Mitra, (5) K. Sehgal, (6) Gouri Shanker, (7) L. R. Kadam, (8) A. A. Alwe, and (9) Kasle. They were acquitted of all charges.

Those sentenced to period already undergone: The sentences of (1) Ajodhya Prasad, (2) P. C. Joshi, (3) Gopal Basak, (4) Dr G. Adhikari and (5) Shamsul Huda under Section 121 A, IPC were upheld but considering the sentences already undergone by each of them as sufficient punishment, the court ordered their release. The sentence passed against Gopendra Chakravarti was reduced to seven months, but he had to stay inside jail for a few days more due to the delay in reaching the court's order.

Three-year-term: (1) Muzaffar Ahmad, (2) S. A. Dange and (3) Shaukat Usmani had their sentences reduced to three years rigorous imprisonment each.

Two-year-term: Philip Spratt's sentence was reduced to rigorous imprisonment for two years.

One-year-term: Sentences passed against (1) S. V. Ghate, (2) K. N. Joglekar, (3) R. S. Nimbkar, (4) Ben F. Bradley, (5) S. S. Mirajkar, (6) Sohan Singh Josh, (7) Dharani Goswami and (8) Mir Abdul Majid were reduced in each case to rigorous imprisonment for one year.

Thus the Meerut Conspiracy Case trial came to an end on 3 August 1933 with the delivery of the High court judgement. It was the longest drawn out conspiracy case trial in judicial history. The inordinate duration of the trial which lasted four years and a half from the date of arrests to the delivery of the final judgement and appeal and confinement of most of the prisoners in jail for the whole of that period, as well as the denial of trial by jury, drew protests from nearly every quarter, includ-

ing indignant statements from such international celebrities as the archbishop of York, Mr H. G. Wells, Professor Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, Professor Harold Laski and A. H. Tawney. President Roosevelt himself is reported to have interested himself in the case.<sup>24</sup>

The heavy sentences of the accused were greatly reduced because of the pressure of the international working class movement and protests of intellectuals. This fact was noted by Professor Brecher of Canada in his book *Nehru—A Political Biography*.

Hutchinson made an effective point in his book *Conspiracy at Meerut* when he wrote—"The arrest of Englishmen with Indians on the same charge not only attracted the critical attention of the world, but was also an object of lesson in international working class solidarity. What had been intended as propaganda against communism had turned into propaganda for communism."<sup>25</sup>

### *The Statements*

The statements of the communist accused in the Meerut Communist Conspiracy Case are a proof positive of the revolutionary spirit with which they were imbued. They bearded the so-called 'British lion' in his own den. They hurled defiance at the prosecutors in the Meerut trial. They ignored the threats of the sessions judges from time to time to punish them for contempt of court and carried on communist propaganda utilising the sessions court as a platform. The ideal of building a new society based on the working class revolution and toppling the old one had made them death-defying.

I will just quote a few paragraphs from the statements of some of the communists to show the dare-devil way in which they faced their prosecutors. They acted fearlessly according to the resolution they had passed earlier. In fact, they set an example before the revolutionary fighters against British imperialism on how to conduct oneself in a bourgeois court. The youth of today should get hold of and read the full statements.

24. *Conspiracy at Meerut*, Hutchinson, p 81.

25. Hutchinson, op cit, p 81.

which will enrich their political and economic knowledge. They contain a mine of information.

S. V. Ghate as the general secretary of the Communist Party of India till his arrest, considered it his duty to place certain facts before the court. He said:

“What is there in communism that frightens them so much? To me it seems that it is because we believe in the irreconcilability of the antagonisms between the classes that comprise the Indian society because we believe in class-war; because we believe that the interests of the toiling masses are fundamentally opposed to the interests of those that represent the ruling class; because we believe that their class has long outlived its usefulness and as such has no right to be in the position in which it is today; because we believe that the vast majority of the workers and peasants have a right to all the things they produce—because of all these facts this class a mighty opponent, its future hangman is the class that we represent—and hence this movement of frenzied falsehood and insensate hurry to crush its opponents before it gains that might.”<sup>26</sup>

Muzaffar Ahmad in the very beginning of his statement said, “I am a revolutionary communist... had been a member till the day of my arrest... the Communist Party of India on the day of my arrest was not officially a section of the Communist International. We did not duly affiliate our party with the Communist International for the reason that we had been weak numerically. Otherwise our party fully believed in the policy, principles and the program of the CI and propagated them as best as it could under the circumstances.”

Ben Bradley discussed all the national and international issues brought against the accused in the course of the trial in a bold statement and exposed the hypocrisy and double-dealing with regard to their defence. He said:

“Thus the position was that while the prosecution with their unlimited resources could bring eight witnesses from England, several from French possessions in India and one from an Indian state, the defence could not even get summonses issued for their witnesses.

26. *Statements, in Sessions Court.* p 1573.

"... This trial is an attack upon the working class movement and specially the militant trade-union movement. The trial as such is a political trial and a political trial of this character only masks the state of panic that the bourgeoisie have got into and it has also registered the fact that they are going along the path to their own destruction...

"I believe that the proletarian revolution will come and that communism will triumph...

"I am confident that this trial will have the very opposite effect to that which the prosecution desire, it will awaken the consciousness of the masses of India and at the same time will focus the attention of the workers of Great Britain on the struggle of the colonial masses, and will undoubtedly be responsible for rousing the workers of Great Britain to take a more active part in the fight against imperialism and for the freedom of the colonial slaves.

"The British Labour Party is acting as the lackey of imperialism and outdoing even the diehard Tory Party in carrying on a reign of terror in India and throughout the empire."<sup>27</sup>

Joglekar's 350 page statement condemned British imperialism and its policies and explained the part the Communist Party of India had played in strengthening and broadening the national freedom movement and popularising the slogans of the revolution and complete national independence. The following passage from his statement gives an evaluation of the case. On 5 November 1931 he said:

"I must congratulate the Indian government and their foolish counsellors, the Bombay and Bengal bourgeoisie, for their stupidity in cooking up this case and raising a mountain out of a molehill. They have done unconsciously the greatest service to Indian revolution by glorifying and raising our ordinary innocent elementary trade union and national emancipatory work to the heights of scientific revolutionary deeds. By prosecuting us they have given tremendous prestige to the cause of communism and have directly accentuated the growth and spread of communist philosophy by kindling a keen desire in the minds of the intelligentsia to dive into the depths of communist prin-

27. *Statements*, in Sessions Court, p 713.

ciples and philosophy. What we could not have achieved, left to ourselves, in ten years of free activity, we have achieved in three years of prison life... The masses during these (1929, 1930, 1931) years have gone through the experience of a terrible economic crisis and they have seen the inability of capitalism as well as of Indian nationalism to meet with their requirements... They have realised the revolutionary need of a revolutionary organisation and have begun to find hope in communism and our trial during all these eventful years has helped the process of attraction of their attention towards the study and application of communist principles in the present Indian situation.”<sup>28</sup>

Philip Spratt in a 100-page statement, replying all the charges levelled against him, straightforwardly said,

“We work under the initial—one may say fundamental disadvantage of being tried by our enemy’s court and under our enemy’s law. An almost equally formidable obstacle in the disparity between our opponent’s financial resources and ours... on general grounds such as these we maintain the impossibility of impartiality or a fair trial in a case between the ruling class and the representatives of its political opponents... In the first place, the case was launched at Meerut... Then we have been refused a jury... We have been refused bail... We have found that while the prosecution could bring witnesses from abroad, we cannot... While they have a more or less unlimited staff of CID men and other officials and technical experts and so on to assist them, the people who come to assist us turn out to be suspicious characters who have been put away under Regulation III... But nevertheless, the pretence of fair trial and even-handed justice is kept up... Our case which is already on the way to becoming a public scandal is helping appreciably to expose the gigantic fraud of the civilising mission and the impartial justice of British imperialism in India.”<sup>28a</sup>

Mirajkar in a very challenging statement running over one hundred pages before the sessions court refuted the charge of adopting dilatory tactics to prolong the case. He said:

28. *Statements*, in Sessions Court, p 2060.

28a. *op cit*, pp 457-59.

"I definitely charge the prosecution that it has deliberately and consciously prolonged this prosecution in order to harass us by producing all sorts of unnecessary and irrelevant evidences, books, pamphlets and papers. Let Mr Wedgewood Benn, the late labour state secretary and Sir Samuel Hoare, the present national government state secretary understood these facts. Let them not like parrots repeat what their underlings in India ask them to do from the platform of the House of Commons.

"The junior public prosecutor... said that if there were any genuine trade unionists and congressmen among the accused, well, they should not be committed to the sessions. Well, sir, . . . several of them promptly told you as well as the magistrate, that they were not communists, that they were (N. M.) Joshi-brand trade unionists... Has the magistrate let them off in spite of their explanation?... I wish to recommend to your honour for immediate release of all those who are not communists . . ."<sup>29</sup>

"In conclusion therefore I once again reiterate that I do not expect any justice from this court... The purpose of my defence statement is to tear the mask of the so-called 'impartial justice' and show it in naked and brutal form of 'class justice'.<sup>30</sup>

P. C. Joshi, after explaining the communist program of revolution, the rules of the Workers' and Peasants' Party and the Youth Leagues in it ended his statement thus: "...We take the trial itself very seriously. In this case we are not on trial but British imperialism is on trial before our final judges, the Indian masses. We are not the accused but prosecutions. We have no doubt that the final judgement of our real judges will be 'forward to revolution!'"<sup>31</sup>

Sohan Singh Josh, defending his revolutionary activities vehemently in the court in a long statement concluded by saying: "I shall rather choose a heavy sentence than forego my opinions that are not to the taste of British imperialism... The case is so serious, so very serious that any man washing his hands of his radical opinions and giving an undertaking like Dharambir that he will not be a communist will never ally with them .. can easily get off scotfree. I abhor to buy my release like

29. *Statements*, in Sessions Court, p 1375.

30. *Ibid*, p 1499.

31. *Statements*, op cit, p 290.



this... I, therefore, challenge the British imperialism to do its worst, for I believe that no power on earth can crush our movement, because even if crushed for a while, it will rise phoenix-like from its ashes and will crush British imperialism our enemy.”<sup>32</sup>

Dange, concluding his 500-page statement said: “A question has been sometimes put whether what we say is defence or defiance... We are putting up a defence, if such a thing is allowed under bourgeois law. But if defence means desertion of principles we cannot put up with it. It is not defiance because thereby I do not gain my objective. It is defence and not defiance in deadly earnest... defence of the right to propagate the principles for which the individual stood and stands.

“I do not defy, but defend and urge that this court do recognise the right of every Indian to hold communist principles, to belong to a communist party, to be one with the international of the world proletariat to carry on trade union and literary activity, while subscribing to Leninism—a right which exists in all the advanced bourgeois democracies and in England itself, on the basic principles of whose judicial system and political liberties this country is said to be governed.”<sup>33</sup>

### *The Government Reports*

Viceroy lord Irwin had started the case with a fanfare, but as the case proceeded and got prolonged, he began to repent for having launched the conspiracy case trial. In December 1930 he remarked that he ‘wished to heaven’, he ‘had never embarked on the Meerut trial’. But at the same time, he expressed his satisfaction at “having these communist patriots (sic.) out of the way at a difficult time”.<sup>34</sup>

We find the highups in Britain and Indian rulers expressing their dissatisfaction over the outcome of the Meerut case. The general admission on their part was that the government had failed to achieve the objective for which the case had been launched.

32. *Statements, in Sessions Court*, 360.

33. *Statements*, Vol IV, pp 2607-08.

34. Irwin to Benn, 19 December 1930. *Halifax's Collections*, Vol 6, p 359.

In the beginning the government expressed 'pleasure' over the trial. But soon after their 'pleasure' turned to concern as the expected propaganda dividends failed to appear. Governor Hailey of UP at that time, earlier in July had expressed his unease at the likely failure of a prosecution which was 'concentrating on propaganda rather than conviction'. (Hailey to de Montmorency, 12 July 1929). He was for confining the case strictly to the evident necessity to secure conviction. The under secretary of state Hertzell 'shared Hailey's horror at the protraction of the Meerut proceedings'.

Mr Wedgewood Benn was the secretary of state for India under the 1929 Labour government. Public protest was making him the target for continuing the case. His correspondence with India government at that time reveals the impact the campaign conducted in Britain by the Meerut prisoners' defence committee was having. He openly backed the prosecution. He complained to the viceroy lord Irwin that 'good many' Labour Party members were going to see him about the trial and added: "This is the echo of the considerable campaign which the Meerut prisoners' defence committee is making in this country." On this occasion (and others) he wrote to the viceroy, "I shall be devoutly thankful when the whole thing is over and done with."<sup>35</sup>

The new viceroy lord Willingdon talked to the secretary of state for India, Hoare, in February 1933 about 'these terrible conspiracy cases' and said that he would 'pretty well assure' Hoare that he was 'going to have no more conspiracy cases' while he was viceroy.

There was widespread sense of outrage in England at the savagery of the sentences passed on the Meerut accused. The resentment, sweep and vigour of the agitation against these sentences was so much that the worried secretary of state, Hoare, in April 1933 sent Willingdon a cutting from the *Daily Express* on the subject with the comment:

"You will see from the cutting that the agitation is by no means confined to the *Daily Herald* and the Labour press, but there is a general feeling, even amongst conservatives that sen-

35. *Benn to Irwin*, 13 February 1930: *Halifax's Collections*, Vol 6, p 33.

tences are too heavy and there might fairly be some remission." (28 April 1933)

Even that cunning bureaucrat Hailey told the governor of Punjab in January: "I do not suppose that they can let the sentences stand; they are rather out of scale for this kind of offence and are much more appropriate to Bengali terrorists." (29 January 1933)

Calculating the profit and loss of the Meerut Conspiracy Case trial, the British imperialists decided not to start such a conspiracy case again. Even when the British rulers banned the Communist Party of India and other political organisations under the influence of the communists and progressives in 1934, they did not arrest anybody. The overall estimate of imperialism of the outcome of the trial was one of failure.

The British Communists deserve our heartfelt comradely thanks for the role they played under the leadership of the CPGB in launching a big campaign in England for the Meerut prisoners' release, for collecting funds for their defence and for mobilising the Labour press against the heavy sentences passed on the prisoners. Rajni Palme Dutt and other communist leaders did yeomen's service in keeping the crying injustice of the Meerut case trial before the public eye.

A great lesson of Meerut trial was that the combined forces of the Indian working class movement and all anti-imperialist sections in India, backed by the international progressive opinion, were capable of frustrating the objectives of imperialist repression. The Meerut Conspiracy Case trial even today underlines the necessity for united action of all anti-imperialist democratic and left forces against the dark forces of reaction, obscurantism and overt or covert fascism.

### *The End*

The British government started the case to do virulent propaganda against communism, against Soviet revolution, the Third International, against the communist movement and the communist party. It wanted to damn the whole movement by stigmatising the accused as anti-national, anti-religion, anti-family, anti-everything that was decent and so on in order to isolate the communist accused from the Indian people and

tried to rouse religious prejudices and national hatred against them. Its second aim was to pass very heavy sentences against the accused to terrorise and terrify the communists and would-be communists.

The communist accused therefore as we have seen decided to meet the government propaganda with a vengeance. They not only turned the table on the government but also paid the latter back in the same coin in a manner which made it to charge the accused of not taking the case seriously. This meant that the government realised at long last that the communists could play the game of propaganda better than it did.

The communist accused defended the communist movement steadfastly and took the offensive on the black deeds of British imperialism, colonialism, its blood-sucking exploitation of India and other colonies under it; they showed that British imperialism's main aim was (and is) to squeeze profits, more profits and still more profits at the cost of the sweat, blood, toil, tear and death of the enslaved peoples. The government found and realised that their game had been lost badly. The communist accused's statements brought not only glory to them but they also strengthened the communist movement outside in the country.

You have a proof of this from the horse's mouth. The Bombay government on 21 June 1933 wrote to the government of India: "The problem of dealing with communists and their activities has again been forced on the government of Bombay by the efforts which have been made for some months in Bombay city, Sholapur and Ahmedabad to bring about a general strike in textile factories. The position which at present exists ...affords a close parallel to that which existed at the beginning of 1928..."<sup>36</sup>

The communists taught the government a lesson to think a hundred times before starting such a conspiracy case against them in future. The Meerut courtroom was successfully utilised by them to make known the true stand of the Communist Party of India. British Intelligence in 1935 admitted that the "Meerut prisoners... extracted... more of advertisement and political

capital from their trial than did their predecessors at Cawnpore." Then the main purpose for which the case had been started was miserably defeated and the results achieved were quite the contrary to what they wanted.

This was the victory the communist prisoners won in the Meerut Conspiracy Case!

In conclusion I may add that certain favourable factors in the situation that existed at that time helped the growth of the communist ideas, the communist movement and the influence of the Communist Party of India. Important among these factors were—(1) On the international plane, Saklatvala's (British MP) visit at the time of the Meerut Conspiracy Case trial helped in negating to no small extent the British anti-communist propaganda in the Meerut case and outside in the country as a whole. He advocated communism boldly during his stay in India and enthused the youth and progressive people by his uninhibited propaganda of communist views, spotlighting the achievements of the Russian revolution, the achievements of the Russian working class, peasantry and people at large. He underlined the effect of the Russian revolution on the working people all over the globe and on the national-liberation movements in the colonial world.

The Communist Party of Great Britain took keen interest in the Meerut case trial. It sent some financial aid and continuously exposed the rotten conditions in which the Meerut prisoners were kept. The British progressive press, the pamphlets and poster propaganda carried on by the CPGB contributed in a big way to highlight the case of the communists in the Meerut trial. Internationally, it helped in forging a united front against British rulers in India. Some members of parliament in Britain played a good role in the campaign against the British government for launching and handling the Meerut case.

The protest of the industrial workers of the Soviet Union and in the Soviet press against the launching of the conspiracy case and their financial contribution to help the defence of the accused in the case emphasised the internationalism of the working class. The campaign started by the League Against

Imperialism against the Meerut trial was of great help in positively strengthening proletarian internationalism.

(2) On the national plane, the appointment of the Simon Commission by the British government with anti-selfdetermination mandate and the support extended to it by the British Labour Party and its government not only shattered illusions about the latter in the Indian people, but it also helped in uniting all the nationalist forces against the Simon Commission. Besides, the British government in India introduced at this time two anti-working class and anti-communist bills—the Trade Disputes Bill and the Public Safety Bill which mobilised the working class in a big way in opposition to them. The appointment of the Whitley Commission to bind still further the working class hand and foot added further fuel to fire. In this way all the political forces in India which mattered were drawn closer to fight the machinations of the British rulers in India.

The cumulative effect of the repressive policies of the British imperialist rulers was that they united the Indian people in a big struggle against the British imperialists to secure the freedom of the country. In this struggle, the working class and all patriotic classes in the national movement unitedly played their glorious part.

This was what the British rulers did not want to happen. But it came about because of the blind repressive policies of the British rulers. The country's freedom movement advanced by leaps and bounds.

Today to solve the postindependence problems faced by the country, the need of the hour is to forge a left and democratic front to wrest power from the hands of the bourgeois parties which have over the last thirtytwo years failed to solve the fundamental problems of the country. Socialism is the only way out of the ills afflicting India today. Let all the left and democratic forces in the country unite and oust the bourgeois parties from power and take the country along the road to socialism.















